Prologue

‘The petals wither and fall from their flower. The leaves from the trees, once beautifully they danced in the wind, now fall to the earth as only dead waste. The grass once green and lush now fades away, covered by a blanket of frost. Another year has passed’ the king said turning from the window in the study, ‘and another year I am forced to endure life without her. You have a chance to do a good thing. Why not make it so?’

‘There is nothing I can do’ the woman repeated for the hundredth time. ‘I think it’s time to face reality. Come out of your grieving. You have to face the fact that she may never wake.’

‘No’ the king repeated. ‘I will never stop trying to save her.’

‘Then many will continue to suffer because of your unwillingness to face the truth.’

‘If you will not help me’ the king said. ‘Perhaps there are others who can.’

‘So what are you going to do? Continue to kidnap until you are so old and tired you’ve lost your mind?’

‘I will do whatever is necessary’ the king answered.

‘This meaningless quest will drive you mad’ the woman answered, ‘if it hasn’t already done so.’

‘I will never be mad’ the king answered simply, ‘if I have her.’

‘Then make the most of your sanity’ the woman stared coolly. ‘And I say for the last time. There is *nothing* I can do.’

The king glared, controlling his anger well despite his rage and despair.

‘Then I have no need for you.’

The king approached the woman sitting in the chair, lifting his hands to grab her.

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Instead of showing fear, the woman turned her head to look behind her, speaking to the figure that only she could see.

‘This is my last chance isn’t it? I won’t ever come back again.’

‘If there was anything I could do to save you...’ the figure answered, not even trying to hold back his grief, ‘then I would do it. But I can’t help you this time……I’m sorry…’

The woman looked forwards to face the king again, but continued to speak to the figure behind her.

‘Please’ she said to the figure. ‘Do not be sad for me. I've lived my life. Find someone younger and protect them. This is my final wish.’

She bowed her head with a smile, closing her eyes as if content. When she opened them again, she stared calmly at the king, and waited for his hands to close around her neck.

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Many days later

The woman stood on the edge of the balcony. The wind this high up was cold and sharp, though not unpleasant on her skin. She had become flushed, exhausted from her trek running up the spiral stairs of the tower behind her. She had thought that she might escape this way, but her path had led only to this dead end.
But she did not despair. She could still escape.
'Mother…' she breathed. 'I will see you again.'
She took a step forward, standing at the very the edge of the wall-less balcony. She tilted, just as she did so, a male figure appeared behind her. He cried out, running forwards to try to stop her. But he was far too late.
She plummeted, head first towards the ground. The last thing she saw was the wall of the tower she had climbed shooting past.
She hit the ground, and was killed instantly.
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Her body was found shortly after, fallen in a bush. The leaves had concealed her as the twisting green vines wrapped themselves around her body, entangling her.
The soldiers had found her. One of them fought through the thick thorns, lifting her lifeless form in his arms and resting her upon the stone ground nearby.
'I'm sorry' the soldier that had carried her said. 'She jumped. We could not reach her in time.'
The man he spoke to raised his head to the tower, seeing above him a row of soldiers standing at the edge, looking down to the scene below.
'My lord!' the soldier who had carried the women gasped. 'Her body. It's gone!'
'No' the man he spoke to said slowly, lifting his eyes to the darkening sky, watching as the thick black clouds rolled above the lands. 'She is still out there somewhere. I will find her.'

Part 1

Chapter One
Ambition

Arlen flicked back the fishing rod. The thin string attached sailed through the air as it was cast back into the water, this time a little further away than before. He leant forwards, holding the simple fishing rod with one hand and resting with his chin upon his knee. His other leg dangled above the water on the short wooden platform he sat on.
The fish were teasing him. Already he had thrown bread crumbs into the water, which they had snapped up in an instant, but they would not chase the lure. Arlen became ever more

frustrated as he watched the small thin fish move in a shoal around the wriggling worm on the hook. Arlen moved the rod, trying to coax the fish. One came closer, looking as if it were about to bite.

But then came a noise. His brothers swung above the water of the pond on the rope swing they had made, letting go of the rope in mid swing and flying through the air. Their hollering was abruptly cut short as they hit the water, one after the other. Arlen alarmed looked back at the shoal of fish, they had scattered.

Losing his patience he threw the rod down into the water below him.

'You idiots' he shouted to his brothers when they surfaced. 'You scared the fish away!'

They weren't listening, instead continued to wrestle with each other in the water. Farrell, the youngest being eleven years old, broke free, swimming as fast as he could towards the platform Arlen sat on. He was swiftly being followed by Brice the eldest, who was sixteen.

'Did you hear what I said?' Arlen huffed when they reached him.

'Relax Mr Serious Face' the youngest, Farrell sang happily. 'Why are you so up-tight all the time?

'Stupid shrimp' Arlen glowered at Farrell.

'Don't call me that!'

'Guys, will you give it a rest?' Brice the oldest shot back.

He hauled himself up onto the platform, sitting beside Arlen. He reached down into the water, helping Farrell out of the pond. The three brothers sat side by side

'You never answered our question' Brice said to Arlen. 'What do you want to be when you grow up?'

Farrell peered around the eldest brother to get a better look at Arlen, waiting eagerly for a response.

'I don't want to say' Arlen replied.

'Why not?' Farrell chirped.

'You'll laugh.'

Farrell and Brice shared a glance.

'We've already told you what we want to be' Brice told him. 'You have to tell us now.'

'I don't have to tell you anything if I don't want to' Arlen answered stubbornly. 'And anyway, everyone wants to be a soldier, though I don't understand why. Look at what happened to father.'

'But think of the honour' Brice pressed. 'Think of the women.'

'Women aren't objects' Arlen glared sullenly.

'I didn't say they were' Brice answered defensively. 'I'm just saying…think of the women.'

'Women love a man who can fight, they find them more attractive' Farrell added.

'How do you know?' Arlen asked.

'Think about it' the eldest brother replied. 'A man who can fight can protect his family. Not many people would mess with a well trained soldier holding a sword. And women need a strong man to defend the family and home.'

'I want to have a wife to protect' Farrell told Arlen. 'And a son I can raise to fight.'

Arlen went silent in thought.

'I'm going to be the best soldier I can be' Farrell said folding his arms, looking smug and nodding to himself. 'I'm going to be a General and have my own army, and fight by day and

by evening I will count my gold in my keep. And when my son is old enough, he can do the same.'
'You see' Brice said speaking to Arlen again. 'Even shrimpy here thinks he can win a fight.'
'Stop calling me that!'
'So?' Brice persisted, ignoring his youngest brother's protests. 'What do you want to be, a soldier?'
'I don't want to be a soldier.'
'Oh? Are we one step closer to getting an answer from you?' Brice teased.
The youngest brother Farrell had now fallen silent, listening again as he waited patiently for his brother's answer.
'Tell us.'
'Promise you won't laugh' Arlen told them.
'I promise by the seven gods that I won't laugh' Farrell called out, speaking louder than was necessary and putting his hand on his heart.
'And I will try my best' Brice added.
'Ok.' Arlen took a deep breath. 'I want to be…a husband.'
His palms began to sweat as he waited nervously for his brother's reaction.
For the longest time neither of them spoke, or even moved.
Then suddenly, Farrell burst out in gales of laughter, and Brice soon followed.
'You promised!' Arlen protested.
'I'm sorry' Brice gasped, wiping away tears from his eyes. 'I can't help it.'
Arlen lifted his foot and shoved Brice back into the water. Brice fell off the platform, hitting the water in an undignified manner. Farrell tried in vain to flee, before he too was grabbed and thrown into the pond.
Once the two were in the water together, they turned on Arlen, each grabbing a leg and pulling him off the platform and into the water with them. Arlen fell in; fighting for air he broke the surface, coughing and spluttering, having swallowed a mouthful of water. He soon recovered, turning on his brothers in the water and going after them, swearing vengeance. The two guilty culprits turned and swam away in a panicked manner, making as much noise and splashes as possible. They tried to escape their brother, pretending to be terrified of his wrath, and all the while teasing him as they made their slow way across the pond and to the other side.

Fifteen years later

The black stallion reared up high, neighing and pawing the air, full of energy, full of life. The rider held on tightly, sat upon a finely crafted saddle, and pulling back on the reins hard.
The stallion's front feet landed back on the ground and the rider kicked the horse's flank, urging the creature onwards.
The two raced through the fields and woodlands, as fast as the stallion could go. The wind wiped the hair of the rider, making his eyes water as they travelled at such speeds. They raced across the countryside, moving as one. The stallion obeying every command from his rider,

every jump, every pull of the reins, no matter how light, they soared onwards towards the town before them, drawing ever closer with every breath.
People working in the fields glanced up as they went by, heading towards the centre of the small town. A crowd waited for the man and the stallion to return, cheering and applauding as the two of them came into view. The man wheeled his horse around; the mighty and beautiful stallion pranced in a circle, throwing its head back. The man reached towards the sheath at his belt, pulling forth a long sword and holding it up for all to see, with the tip pointed upwards towards the sky.
The crowd cheered again, roaring loudly together. Farrell dismounted his horse proudly, striding towards one of the men in the crowd, opening his arms out with warmth in his heart.
'Farrell' Brice said as he embraced his brother.
'Isn't he a magnificent beast?' Farrell asked Brice, patting his shoulder roughly.
'He certainly is' Brice nodded towards the stallion enviously. 'How does he ride?'
'Couldn't be better' Fallen glowed. 'He is fast, and tireless. We passed some children playing with firecrackers, jumping around and making all sorts of noise. But he was not nervous, not in the slightest; he didn't even seem to notice them at all.'
'He is very well trained' Brice replied. 'He has no equal.'
'Save for the king's horse' Farrell contradicted with a grin.
Horses were held in high regard in the kingdom they lived in, and were often used in battle. The colour of a horse indicated the rider's status in society, most soldiers had horses coloured chestnut or grey, or bearing more than one colour or shade. The king and the royal family were the only ones in the kingdom to own pure white horses, these were very rare. Jet black horses on the other hand were earned, given by the king as gifts only to those the king found deserving, those that had done great deeds, or had a substantial amount of money to buy one themselves.
'And who would have thought' Brice went on, laughing and shaking his head, 'my little brother would rise above me and become the highest ranking soldier in the kingdom, and from this small town where nothing of interest normally happens.' He laughed again. 'From this day on, every soldier in the kingdom answers to your word.'
Farrell could not suppress a smile. 'I know. I hardly dare to believe it myself.' His eyes passed over the faces of the many men within the small town square, watching him with admiration, jealousy, and loyalty all at once.
'But where is Arlen?' Farrell asked his elder brother, realising he was not present.
'I don't know' Brice admitted, 'but I know where he might be.'
'Don't tell me' Farrell droned, raising an eyebrow.
'Praying' the two brothers voiced simultaneously.

The brothers entered the holy building, marching side by side down the long corridor that was the entranceway. It was a tedious walk. Their footsteps echoed on the marble floors as they passed over the intricate designs that were lined in silver. The smooth walls either side of them were of blank stone, greys and blacks in colour. And as they reached the end of the

corridor at last, before them stood a tall, magnificent stained glass window which depicted a female figure, a goddess. On one side she outstretched her arm, on the other, her wing curled around her body. She was lifted in the sky, and her hair which was short and gold and wavy, shone down upon the farmland at her feet like rays of the sun.

The brothers reached this beautiful masterpiece, but didn't bother to spare it even the briefest of glances. There were two archways, one either side of the stained glass which led to the main body of the temple, here is where the people prayed. The brothers entered through one of the archways, and into a massive circular hall. A great fire, forever burning was lit behind the stained glass, lighting up the image of the goddess to be admired by those who entered. The temple inside was dimly lit, with a very high ceiling in which the shadows clung, and very few windows in which the sunlight struggled to pass through its narrow gaps. Most of the place was lit by torches, and the smell of incense was overpowering.

Farrell stifled a cough as he entered, covering his mouth and trying his best not to feel so out of place. He nodded respectfully to a small group of women, wearing white dresses lined in light blue; and white cloths that covered their hair. These were holy women, those who cared for the temple.

'I can hardly breathe in here' Brice complained, squinting as if the stuffy atmosphere affected his sight.

'There he is' Farrell pointed as he spotted their brother.

Composing himself he made his way over to him, passing through the hall and weaving around the many statues and depictions of the gods and goddesses. The room looked almost like a museum, with pieces of art and beautiful murals all around them. And dotted here and there around the statues of their deities, were little red cushions and stools meant for praying. Their middle brother Arlen, was on his knees upon one of these cushions, head bowed. He prayed before the statue of the god Faeroe. A god in the shape of a man, there was a great spiked disk on his back, fox-like ears upon his head, and a long lizard-like tail sweeping around his stone feet. In his hand, he bore a great staff, in the other he wore a strange sort of glove where the fingers extended into knives.

Farrell and Brice stood behind their brother. Farrell cleared his throat obviously, and Arlen lifted his head.

'You need not trouble yourselves with me' Arlen spoke, knowing instinctively that both his brothers were there without having to look.

'Trouble ourselves?' Brice gave a disapproving expression. 'We do not trouble ourselves with you. You're our brother.'

'Why do you pray so much anyway?' Farrell asked him.

'There are many people who send their prayers to the gods' Arlen replied. 'I must pray often so that I get noticed.'

'And what do you pray?'

'I pray' Arlen said, 'that when I meet the right woman, I can give her a good home, safety and wealth.'

'Shouldn't you pray to meet the right woman first?' Brice suggested. He and Farrell dissolved into sniggers.

'You may laugh' Arlen replied carelessly. 'But some of us believe.'

'Forgive me brother' Brice apologised. 'I did not mean any offense by it.'

‘No matter’ Arlen replied curtly, rising to his feet. ‘They are watching you as well.’
‘I don’t know why you buy into this holy nonsense’ Farrell said shaking his head. ‘There are no gods, and there is no one watching us. All of this’ he said indicating the temple around them, ‘is made up by men.’
‘If you say so’ Arlen said, turning to him finally. ‘Do you like your new horse?’
Farrell sighed wearily at him.

That evening, they celebrated.
Arlen agreed to go along with his brothers only reluctantly, and allowed himself to be dragged away from the holy temple he loved so much, and to other parts of their small town. There was only one inn where they lived, and this is where Arlen found himself, hours later, watching his younger and elder brother down mug after mug of ale.
He heaved a heavy sigh, thumping his elbow on the table and resting his chin on his fist, his other hand around his one mug of ale he had barely sipped yet.
‘Cheer up brother’ Farrell slurred, slipping forwards and spilling the contents of his mug everywhere.
Arlen drew back in distaste, flicking the ale spilt on the table back at his brother.
‘Keep your drink on your half of the table.’
‘Oi’ Farrell cried indignantly, trying to hide from the splashes as Arlen continued to flick at him. ‘Stop that!’
Brice cackled hysterically at this. Leaning too far back he fell off his stool and hit the floor, legs waving in the air ridiculously, at which point Farrell began to cackle also.
Arlen groaned into his hand, ignoring his brothers as Brice picked himself up off the floor, and then picked a fight with Farrell.
The two became locked in a drunken fistfight in which neither was able to land a punch.
Arlen rose from the table and walked away, hearing the sound of bodies crashing into tables behind him, and the disgruntled reaction from the other guests. He left the inn, heading home.

It was getting dark outside he noticed with regret, thinking of all the time he had wasted watching his brothers get wasted. The sun had just dipped below the horizon, bringing along in its wake the coming darkness.
Arlen hesitated then, noticing a female figure silhouetted against the sky before him. She was sitting upon a low wall, with the failing light behind her. He had to squint to see who it was.
‘Mandy?’ he asked uncertainly. ‘Is that you?’
He heard her teasing chuckle, and watched as she uncrossed her legs, sliding off the wall and sauntering towards him.
He drew in a breath as she came closer to him, lifting her head to his so that their faces were inches apart. She gleamed at him seductively.
‘Arlen’ she purred. ‘It’s such a coincidence for you to run into me like this.’
‘Uh…you looked like you were waiting for me’ he stammered.
‘Well…’ a devious glint shone in her eyes. ‘I guess some people are just drawn together.’
He stumbled back away from her, and into the wall of the building behind. Mandy giggled at this, hunching her shoulders as she did so.

‘Such a shy little thing you are’ she went on. Mandy glided towards him, the hem of her skirt lifted as she moved. ‘One might think that you’ve never been with a girl before.’ She leant forwards, resting her hand upon the wall behind him, trapping him further. ‘But I know that cannot be true, not with all the women that are chasing you.’
‘But I *have* never been with a girl before’ Arlen protested.
Mandy hesitated.
‘What?’ she laughed.
‘I…I mean…’ Arlen stammered, ‘…not serious…I've not…found someone. Not the right one…yet…’ He gave a nervous laugh.
Mandy raised an eyebrow uncertainly at him. She remained standing over him.
‘There are no women chasing me’ Arlen denied, showing his hands and waving at her, his heart hammering in his chest.
‘Don’t give me that’ she frowned. ‘Half the women in this town grovel after you, and the other half are either too old to remember what goes where, or too young to know what goes where.’
Arlen slumped his shoulders, heaving a dramatic and heavy sigh.
‘It’s just so hard’ he whined, suddenly sounding desperately sad. ‘I wish I had more time to myself, but my poor mother…she is sick. I spend so much time trying to make her better. She hardly recognises me most of the time. Her eyesight is failing, as is her memory. She still thinks my father is alive; she calls for him….it’s so tragically sad…’ He covered his face with his hands, shaking his head as if in denial. ‘My father died in the war years ago, but she’s forgotten. I have to keep pretending that he’s on his way home, or she will be driven mad through grief and kill herself on the very spot.’
‘That’s terrible’ Mandy cried, backing away, concern and sorrow was written all over her face.
‘I know!’ Arlen forcibly suppressed a smirk, before looking up at her again. ‘She is so terribly confused all the time, I have to lock her in her room, or else she will fall down the stairs! The other day she tried to climb out of the window. I had to run outside to try to catch her!’
‘Poor dear’ Mandy sympathised.
‘I was just on my way to give her her medicines. If she doesn’t get her medicines, then she spends all night screaming that there are bats coming out of her ears.’
‘Well you had better hurry’ she told him.
‘I will’ Arlen hastened. ‘I only left her for a brief moment; I only hope that I make it back in time. Anything could have happened in the time I've been away.’
‘Don’t keep her waiting then’ she urged.
‘I won’t’ Arlen said, tip toeing around her. ‘I just hope that this time she will recognise me, and not try to set me on fire on sight.’
He ran away from her, not even waiting for a response. He muttered one word under his breath as he rounded a corner.
‘Idiot.’
Arlen ran the rest of the way home, scurrying as fast as he could to avoid running into anyone else.

When he reached his house he slammed the door after him and bolted it, locking himself in. He stood leaning against the door, waiting for his breath to return to him.
Arlen let out a deep sigh, straightening up and taking in the environment around him.
His home was small, tiny in fact. Downstairs was just a single room, the kitchen, the bathroom was out back. There was a table, and only one chair to sit on. Arlen felt distain purely from looking at it, thinking of how it needed a woman's touch to make it feel better. Some flowers, some fresh paint on the walls. A picture here and there would make the place far homelier that it was. But no woman would want to live here, how could he raise a family in such a tiny house?
He sighed again miserably, ascending the steep stairs up to the floor above, where there was again, just one tiny room. And this was where he slept.
Arlen lay back on the double bed, thinking of how large and cold it felt sleeping in it alone.
He stared up at the ceiling, where the thick layer of coble webs held dust in carpets upon them. He didn't want to breathe too heavily while looking up, in case some fell on him. He didn't like spiders, and hated even more the sight and feel of coble webs.
Arlen rolled over on his side, not even bothering to take his boots off. He closed his eyes, drifting gradually into sleep.

Chapter Two
First Sight

Farrell groaned, opening his eyes tentatively and lifting his hand to this throbbing head.
'It is morning?' he grumbled.
Beside him Brice began to stir, moaning in agony at the pain in his neck as he had slept awkwardly. He gazed blearily about, squinting in the bright light. The two brothers were sitting on empty barrels outside the inn, and chickens were picking at the dirt at their feet.
'Did we sleep here?' Brice rasped, in a voice barely audible. 'My mouth feels like it's full of sand.'
'Why have I got a bruise on my shoulder?' Farrell asked his brother as he examined himself. 'Did you hit me?'
'Naw I think you fell over.'
'I don't remember.'
'Me neither.'
Farrell leant forwards, finding his feet he stumbled, scattering the chickens as they ran in all directions. Farrell grasped his head now with both hands, doubled over and moaning.
'How much did I drink?'
Brice beside him was cautiously trying to stand, holding onto the barrels around him for support. 'We obviously had a great time' he said.
Farrell opened his eyes, noticing a pair of delicate green shoes painted in flowers and ivy. He slowly lifted his head, seeing the owner of the shoes standing before him. The woman smiled kindly.
'Mandy? Is that you?'

‘Hello Farrell’ Mandy beamed sweetly.
She was perfect. Not a single blond hair was out of place, tied up high on her head and held in place with flowers. Her makeup was lavish; she dressed extravagantly in dark colours and wore excessive jewellery that hung from her ears and wrists.
‘What are you doing here?’ Farrell grumbled.
‘I noticed you from far away’ she told them. ‘I thought I'd come over to see how your mother was doing.’
Farrell made a face, exchanging a glance with Brice.
‘Our mother?’
‘Our mother died nearly ten years ago’ Brice told her.
At hearing this Mandy pursed her lips, puffing herself up. ‘What?’
‘You didn’t know?’ Farrell asked her.
‘Your brother’ she spoke through gritted teeth, ‘told me she was unwell.’
Brice drew a sharp intake of breath, speaking to Farrell. ‘I think we just got Arlen in trouble.’
Mandy turned on her heel and stormed off, balling her fists and hunching her shoulders, muscles bulging as if she was ready to hurt something. Farrell and Brice stayed where they were for a moment, gathering themselves and trying not to be sick, when a short time later a panicked Arlen found them.
‘Oh thank the gods! There you are’ he gasped.
‘What have you been telling Mandy?’ Farrell said to him, with his head between his knees.
‘She’s just come to my house!’ Arlen fumbled. ‘Quick, you have to help me; I had to escape through the window!’
‘Why do you let yourself get in trouble like this?’ Brice glared at him.
‘I had to say something’ Arlen argued back. ‘I can’t get her off my back, she’s practically stalking me.’
‘Just tell her you're not interested’ Farrell told him straightening up. ‘And she’ll leave you alone.’
‘I can’t, don’t you understand? If I do something like that, she’ll make the situation as messy as she possibly can! You know what she’s like; she hates not being the centre of attention. I can’t deal with that!’
‘Alright’ Farrell waved at him, trying to quieten him down. ‘Let’s go back to my place; then we can talk properly.’
‘Can we move quickly?’ Arlen asked glancing nervously around. ‘I don’t want to be spotted by her.’
Brice chuckled to himself, shaking his head at Arlen’s reaction.
‘Oh Arlen’ he sighed. ‘What have you done?’

Farrell’s house was built on the edge of the small town upon the lip of a hill. Built like a mansion, the place was grand. Two large fields sat either side of a wide path that stretched towards the manor. In the field on one side resided Farrell’s chestnut mares. In the other field roaming in the open space behind high fencing, was his newly acquired black stallion he had named Alastor, meaning ‘avenging spirit’. The stallion was whinnying and prancing around,

being driven wild by the mares in season. Farrell nodded approvingly at him as he and his brothers went by.
‘You will sire many foals’ he told Alastor as the stallion raised his head, curling back his lips. ‘I will breed many horses just like you.’
‘How is he settling in?’ Brice asked him as he admired the creatures shining black coat.
‘Well enough’ Farrell smirked. ‘However he is easier to handle when the mares are not about.’
They reached the manor, before them stood a pair of solid wooden doors which towered high above their heads. Farrell groaned with effort as he used all his strength to open both doors at once, stepping into the entrance hall of his home.
Light flooded into the hall through the tall windows all around, lighting every surface. The glow from the sun outside bounced off the marble floors and stairs; the inside of the manor was almost as beautiful as the temple where Arlen prayed. But the home was not decorated with beautiful statues and pictures, but with weapons and armour.
Farrell closed the doors after them and turned to his brothers.
‘Right’ he said. ‘I suppose I should offer you a drink or something?’
A figure came rushing up to the three brothers then, an aging woman, wrinkled but still fit.
‘My lord Farrell’ she bowed respectively. ‘You're home. Is there anything I can do or bring for you?’
‘Yes’ Farrell smiled.
‘No’ Arlen butted in loudly. His voice echoed around the hall.
Brice shot him a peculiar look.
‘I mean’ Arlen composed himself. ‘No thank you.’
‘Arlen’ Farrell sighed exasperated.
‘No’ Arlen interrupted again. ‘I don’t like being served like a cripple. I have legs to walk and arms to carry. I can bring my own drinks to myself if I need them. But thank you anyway Linda’ he nodded to the lady.
She bowed to him, but remained where she was until Farrell sent her away with a wave.
‘Thank you’ Farrell said to the servant, ‘you may go.’
She hurried off into one of the many rooms within the manor.
‘Arlen, why do you do this to me?’ Farrell asked his brother, touching his forehead and sighing wearily.
‘I don’t like servants’ Arlen replied flatly.
Brice next to him just shook his head, slack jawed.
‘Come on’ Farrell mumbled, leading the way to the kitchen.
He prepared a cup of coffee for each of them.
‘I'm surprised you know how to make this stuff’ Arlen said to him, sniffing the contents of his mug as if a little suspicious. ‘You let your servants do too much for you.’
‘They do do a lot for me’ Farrell admitted. ‘But that doesn’t mean that if they weren’t around I wouldn’t be able to function.’
‘You're forgetting’ Brice told Arlen. ‘Our little brother has won wars. Heck, he’s even outshone me, and I'm older than him.’
‘Anyway’ Farrell spoke loudly. ‘Please change the subject, or else you’ll make me blush with your flattery.’

‘Yes.’ Brice sipped his drink. ‘We were talking about how badly you’ve screwed up again…*Arlen!’* He shot a glare at him. ‘You told Mandy our mother is alive?’
Arlen’s expression began to dampen.
‘She came over to ask us how she was doing’ Brice went on.
Arlen’s whole body began to sag.
‘What the hell did you say to her?’ Brice interrogated. ‘She looked furious.’
‘I um….’ Arlen hesitated.
‘Out with it’ Farrell ordered. ‘You may as well get it over with.’
‘I told her that our mother was senile and that she thinks that bats come out of her ears.’
‘You told her what?!’ his brothers spoke at once.
Arlen shrugged helplessly.
Farrell groaned, covering his face with a hand.
‘My poor aching head’ he lamented. ‘It’s too early in the morning for this.’
‘Why don’t you want her?’ Brice asked Arlen. ‘She’s a lovely girl.’
‘No!’ Arlen cried dramatically back. ‘I would never want to spend the rest of my life with a woman so stupid and gullible. I mean really…’
Suddenly there was a knock on the door. The brothers all glanced at each other uncertainly.
‘Are you expecting someone?’ Brice asked Farrell.
‘No’ he answered, rising to his feet and marching towards the doors.
Farrell pulled back one of the heavy doors, seeing a young female figure standing before him.
‘Hello Sue’ Farrell blinked. ‘What can I do for you?’
‘Is Arlen there?’ the lady asked him politely.
‘Yeah’ Farrell began turning back to the entrance hall from which the kitchen could be seen. ‘He’s right….’
Farrell only saw Brice sitting at the table, staring back at him.
‘*Where is he?*’ Farrell mimed to Brice.
Brice simply indicated towards a window that was behind him, an open window. The curtains either side lifted in the breeze.
Farrell gave Brice an alarmed look. Brice simply shrugged.
Arlen ran as fast as he could away from the house. The brothers who remained in the manor stood before the window, watching Arlen growing smaller and smaller as he ran across the fields and into the horizon.

Brice returned to his own home later that day, and was greeted immediately by his wife.
‘Brice, my darling. Where have you been?’
He smiled to her, taking her face in his hands and kissing her.
‘I'm sorry Alice’ he said. ‘I didn’t mean to stay out all night, but…’
‘I know’ she interrupted, patting his hair down lovingly. ‘Your brother must celebrate his promotion. He should be proud.’
Brice smiled at his wife again. ‘I'm so lucky to have you’ he told her. ‘You just…understand.’

‘Well’ she beamed, gliding back away from him. ‘What kind of wife would I be if I didn’t understand and look after my own husband? Oh…by the way I've made breakfast for you.’
Brice chuckled to himself. ‘You are too good to me woman.’
Striding towards him and heading for the door was his first and so far only child, Shawn.
‘What are you doing with that?’ Brice asked sternly, eyeing the bow Shawn held in his hand and the quiver of arrows at his back.
Shawn grinned slyly, clutching the weapon to his chest.
A handsome, tall and muscular boy of twelve, Shawn was the son every father dreamed of. Brave, confident, strong, he was a born fighter. He had gained most of his father’s traits, but had his mother’s blond hair, and was as mischievous in his youth as Brice had been in his. But he had a good heart. If Brice ever had to leave home, he would feel his wife would be safe, with Shawn to protect her.
‘Where do you think you’re going?’ Brice interrogated.
‘Father’ Shawn began. ‘I was just on my way out to meet my friends; we’re going out to hunt.’
Brice raised his finger in warning to him. ‘If I find out you’ve hurt yourself doing something stupid again I will be less than pleased. I don’t want to find any more unexplained stitches on you.’
‘So you're saying that if I hurt myself I should hide it better?’
Brice clocked him over the back of the head. ‘Get out.’
Shawn rushed through the door without a backwards glance. Brice watched as his son mounted one of their chestnut horses tied up outside, kicking the beast into a gallop. He frowned as Shawn rode away, but his eyes grew gentle.
‘He is a good boy, is he not?’ Alice said.
‘He is’ Brice replied as he closed the door.
He turned to his loyal wife. ‘Alice. How have you been feeling?’
‘Well enough’ she replied simply, hovering towards him and taking him by the arm, leading him into the kitchen.
She brought him before the table, pulling back a chair and putting her hands upon his shoulders, she forced him down into the seat.
‘How did you know I was coming?’ Brice asked her as she placed a generous plate of food before him.
‘I didn’t’ she answered happily, swaying on the spot and hugging herself, clearly pleased with herself.
‘But you have all this food prepared for me.’
She leant forwards, elbows upon the table. ‘I always have food prepared for you.’ She kissed his cheek and floated away, singing to herself as she began to tidy.
She faltered suddenly, turning back to Brice. ‘What's wrong?’
‘Nothing’ Brice replied hastily.
He glanced about, taking in the rooms around him. His house was comfortable, but modest. Larger than Arlen’s, but smaller than Farrell’s, Brice was content with what he had.
‘Are you happy here?’ Brice asked his wife.
‘Happy?’ she repeated uncertainly. ‘Of course I am happy.’
‘Are you sure?’

She slid back towards the table, pulling up a chair beside Brice, she sat facing him.
'Why are you asking these questions all of a sudden?'
Brice sighed deeply, leaning back in his chair and resting his head back.
'It's just Arlen.'
'Ah' she replied. 'I see.'
'I just worry so much for him. He wants so much from life, but…' Brice shook his head. 'He's just so miserably all the time, so unhappy…it really brings me down.'
'I know you care much for him' Alice said, placing her hand upon his arm and squeezing. 'But you cannot live his life for him. He makes his own choices, as do you.'
'I know.'
'And besides' she continued, 'you have your own things to worry about.'
Brice brightened at this, placing a hand upon her stomach.
'I know, of course you're right' he laughed.
'I know I'm right' she flirted, leaning closer to him teasingly. 'I'm right about everything.'
Brice laughed out at this, taking her in his arms and pulling her towards him. Alice squealed in delight, sitting upon his lap and hugging him. He finished his breakfast eating around her, as she refused to move from that point until his plate was empty.
Once his plate was clear, she took it away. With their son gone out, the two had the place to themselves.
'Alice' he breathed her name as he held her. 'I love you.'
She held him back, hugging him tighter and humming joyfully to herself.
'I love you too' she replied, 'my dear husband.'
Far away, hidden in a clutch of trees on the edge of the small town, was Arlen. Picking twigs from around where he sat and breaking them into pieces, throwing them one by one into the small pond before him. He watched the ripples in the water growing outwards from the point where the twigs had fallen.
The water otherwise was still. Arlen doubted anything lived beneath its surface. The water was murky, and stagnant.
Arlen broke another piece of twig, and threw.

It was many hours later that he risked returning to the town. Moving quickly and keeping his head down, he headed to the one place he felt the safest, the place he spent most of his time when in doubt. The holy temple.
He slipped through the large double doors, closing them quietly behind him. Arlen jogged down the long marble corridors. He glanced up at the stained glass at the end of the path that bore the depiction of the goddess named Micro, elevated in the sky with her single wing outstretched. Arlen entered the main body of the temple through one of the archways, letting out a deep sigh of relief at the familiar sights around him. He hardly noticed the incense anymore, the incense that both of his brothers found so overpowering. He bowed his head respectfully to a small group of holy women passing by, dressed all in white with their hair covered in white cloths. They each returned his bow, smiling kindly in recognition.
Arlen sighed again; shoulders sagging as his body relaxed. He felt happiest here in this place, more than anywhere else in the world. This temple was more his home than the building he slept in.

Arlen stepped forwards, moving at a gentle pace between the beautiful sculptures of the gods and goddesses around him, admiring each in turn. These were the seven gods that ruled the lands. The gods did not specialize in any single thing, but had small powers in every field. Each of the seven gods were needed to keep the world alive. Or so it was believed.
Arlen picked a statue at random, the goddess Ludas; a beautiful deity, clad in gold with a crown of blue feathers.
Arlen approached the statue, and knelt on the cushions before it. Thinking of what Brice had said to him the last time his brothers had visited him in the temple, he began to pray.
Please, my goddess Ludas, let me find the right woman. I don't want to spend the rest of my life alone.

The next day

'Where is he?' Farrell demanded of Brice.
'I haven't a clue' Brice shrugged back. 'I haven't seen him since the other day when he escaped through your window.'
Farrell gritted his teeth in annoyance. 'Dam him that fool. Doesn't he know how important this is?'
Brice shrugged wordlessly back.
Farrell shook his head in exasperation, dropping the matter from his thoughts; instead he turned to address his men, tens of which were gathered around him.
'Soldiers! Are you ready for battle?'
The host of men threw up their arms to cheer, weapons in hand. Horses tossed their heads and pranced on the spot, whinnying excitedly at the commotion.
'There is a dock near here that's been attacked by pirates' Farrell called over their heads. 'Let us rid our shores of this pirate scum, and send them back to the murky depths where they belong!'
Alastor reared dramatically as the soldiers around him roared in approval and anticipation of the coming fight. Screaming in fury the black stallion tore through the streets and out of the town as Farrell led the charge. The thunder of hooves upon the earth, even from a smaller band of riders would strike fear into the hearts of their enemies, as they rode with shields raised and swords held high. Many of the townsfolk who stayed behind cheered and waved as they departed, sending with them their prayers.

From above, upon a little hilltop on the edge of the small town was a man. Standing upon one of the many balconies of his ostentatious home, he watched as the band of about thirty men rode out of the town.
The Duke, a man called Bairn was a beefy man reaching into his fifties. Slowly balding with aging skin, his luxurious lifestyle had given him the large belly that came with rich meals and much drinking. He had moved to this quiet part of the map to retire from the harder parts of his work.

Many years ago he had married the daughter of a high lord; she was far younger than him, and a true beauty. Unlike her husband, she had kept most of her good looks as she aged, despite the fact that her life had been so wrought with grief. The many children they had had over the years, had dwindled in number. Now there were only three.

Bairn turned away from the balcony, returning to his home. He found his two remaining sons in the library. They were young men in their early twenties, sombre figures, both dressed all in pure black. One son was seated with a book on his lap, the other loomed before a bookshelf like a ghostly figure.

'Where is your sister?' Bairn spoke up, breaking the silence in the room.

His sons looked up. They both had dreamy expressions, and never seemed to concentrate on anything that didn't grasp their interest for more than a few moments.

'She is outside' his eldest answered in a weak voice, barely audible. He returned his attention to the book on his lap.

'She likes it outside' the younger son replied, speaking to the books on the shelf before him. 'She doesn't like being behind these walls.'

The Duke frowned at his sons. 'I suppose I needn't have asked.'

He waited for a response from either of his sons, when none came, he left.

Bairn found his daughter within the garden, where she spent most of her time. The high walled garden at the back of the home was large with all manner of beautiful trees and flowers within. There were fountains where birds sang and bathed, small ponds where koi swam, and ornaments depicting the creatures that were not found within the garden, those that had not found a way to cross the wall. Creatures like foxes and dear and otters, even a tortoise, if you were observant and patient enough to find it.

His daughter stood with her back to him, singing the most beautiful melody. He paused for a moment to listen.

Soft and lyrical like heavens own chorus, her voice was perfect, and sweet.

Only when she was finished, did she turn and spot her father, though she did not look surprised to see him there.

Bairn smiled at her sweetly, stepping off the stone path and onto the neat grass of the garden before him.

'Ramana' he said.

'Father' she bowed her head to him respectively.

'I'm sorry I've not spent much time with you lately' he said to her. 'I've been…'

'Busy' she finished. 'I know. Doing dukey things, gathering taxes here, supplying armour there, it must all be very exhausting.'

'Indeed' Bairn finished dryly. He cleared his throat, pondering on how he should proceed. 'Listen to me my daughter; you will not be a child forever. Tomorrow will be your eightieth birthday; then you can leave these walls and be free.'

'I know' she nodded.

'You can come and go as you wish.'

'I know.'

'Are you not pleased?'

She bowed her head to him. 'I wonder what waits for me out there. I feel a dark presence, that of which I cannot place.'

‘Are you frightened?’
‘Not frightened’ she replied, ‘merely…curious.’
‘I see.’ He cleared his throat again. ‘I just wanted to check that you are well.’
‘I am’ she replied curtly.
‘Well…good.’
‘There really is no need to worry about me father.’
‘There is every need’ he argued. ‘You are my daughter, the only one I've ever had. You are a treasure that must be guarded…and cherished.’ He dipped his head to her. ‘I must leave now; I've much to do…dukey things and all that.’
She smiled at him.
‘Right’ Bairn fumbled. ‘I will…just leave now.’ He waved awkwardly at her before strolling away, leaving Ramana alone once more.
She chuckled to herself as she watched him go, feeling a warmth growing inside her heart. She loved her father very much.
‘Tomorrow’ she sighed to herself. ‘A new dawn…’ she opened her hand, catching one of the many falling petals from the trees around her. ‘A new life.’

Farrell led the charge as his troupe of nearly thirty men descended upon the harbour.
The pirates who had begun to make themselves at home, clearly not expecting much resistance, or at least not so soon, were caught off guard.
Farrell made the first kill, swinging low his sword at an unsuspecting sail boy. The poor fool had not known what was coming.
The mounted soldiers tore through the harbour, killing all in their path that were not of their own. Within what felt like no time at all, the carnage was over, and any remaining pirates, those that had fled or hidden on their ships, were retained. The innocent bystanders who had been caught up in the attack rose to their feet now, others coming out of the buildings they had been hiding in, and all were cheering. Farrell ignored their calls and praise.
‘What should we do with the prisoners sir?’ one of his soldiers asked him.
Farrell cast his eyes down to the row of men that had been bound and forced on their knees. Thieves and cutpurses, liars and dishonest men, these were the dregs of human-kind. They were all dressed in tatty, weather-worn clothes that smelt like salt. Some of the men wore excessive and expensive jewellery that was no doubt stolen. There was even a young boy amongst them; he could not have been more than fourteen in age. Farrell held the boys fearful gaze for a moment, before turning his back on him.
‘We take no prisoners’ Farrell spoke back to his soldier, ‘especially of this type. Kill them.’
He walked away from the sound of cries cut short and throats being slit, not looking back.
‘We go home now?’ Brice asked Farrell, joining his side and walking with him.
‘Yes my brother’ Farrell smiled. ‘We go home, and we celebrate. We are done here.’

They returned to the small town in success. A brief encounter that was done and dusted in naught but a few hours, with all thanks to Farrell, as many would say. Farrell praised the men he led for their part, for none had been lost. Slowly the small band of soldiers separated once they reached the town, each going to their own homes, some to wives and children.
The sky was darkening, and the distant figures of men and women in the town going about their business were becoming nothing more than vague silhouettes. Brice walked with his brother, talking and smiling as they made their way slowly through the town. Recounting the finer point of the battle of this day and previous days, they spoke of politics, the king, and many things that would bore most women. They ambled beside their tired horses, passing a particular point in the town where women of the night liked to gather. A few of them hung around outside the only inn the town held. Farrell glanced sideways towards them. Two of the women caught his attention, both eyeing him up and down and batting their eyelashes seductively.
The two women were dressed in draping garments that revealed the side of their breasts, arms and when they walked, their legs. Their long hair was tied up and they both wore heavy make-up around their eyes, and painted tattoos running down their arms.
Noticing Farrell's prolonged gaze they smiled simultaneously. Straightening up and strolling over to him, they each took him by an arm. Farrell grinned slyly.
'My knight' one of the women cooed. 'What a long and tiring day you must have had.'
'Come with us' the other woman said in a purring voice. 'We will help you relax.'
Farrell's smile grew wider across his face as he surveyed both of the women with interest. He grabbed both of them suddenly around the waist, pulling them close to him.
'Well' Brice interrupted loudly at this point. 'I suppose I had better be going.'
'Awww, won't you stay with us?' one of the women said, sad to see him go.
'Yes won't you stay with us?' the other repeated. 'We could use the extra hands.'
'I had better go' Brice repeated. 'Home. To my wife.'
'We understand' one of the women winked.
'Come' the other said, pulling Farrell away as he let go the reins of his horse. 'We will put you at ease.'
'I'll see you tomorrow then Farrell' Brice said loudly as he walked away, taking the reins of Farrell's horse with his own as he went.

Elsewhere within the small town, within the temple, a man prayed.
Arlen knelt with his hands together and head bowed. Before the statue of the god Faeroe, the fox-eared man with a sweeping lizard tail. To him Arlen sent his prayers.
Please. My lord god. Give meaning to my life. Let me find the right woman, to love, and who would love me in return. Make her loyal. Make her honest. Make her pure. Make her a good wife to me, as I would be a good husband to her.
This is all I ask for.

The sun rose early the next morning. Ramana stood inside the tall walls that surrounded the manor in which she lived, standing before the great gates that led to the outside world beyond

her home. The low sun at this time of day could not reach into the grounds, and Ramana was cast in a great shadow.
She reached for the tall gates, pushing forwards with all her strength; she heaved the heavy double doors open.
The sun's touch spilled into the grounds, drowning Ramana in light. She regarded the new world at her feet, staring down at the small town before her.
Ramana took a step forward. For the first time she entered the world beyond the walls.

Farrell was rudely awoken by the sun glaring in his face. He opened his eyes, squinting and trying to shield himself from the light.
It was bright outside, far too bright for his liking. Farrell sat up, wondering what time in the morning it was. He saw the two women in bed either side of him, and remembered the events of the night before. They were both completely naked beneath the sheets they lay.
Farrell pushed the sheets back so that he could stand, and walking down the bed landed lightly on the wooden floor at the foot of the bed. The women behind him still half asleep frowned in discomfort at the cool morning air against their bare skin. Pulling the sheets back up again to cover themselves and keep them warm, they went back to sleep.
Farrell dressed, throwing several coins on the bed between the sleeping women; he left without a word or backwards glance.
Farrell returned home briefly, seeing that Brice had returned Alastor to his field before he had gone home the night before. He smiled approvingly at his brother's kind action; then suddenly with a twinge of sadness, remembered Arlen. There was one place he was sure to be, but Farrell had an idea, and needed to do something before visiting Arlen in the temple, where he was sure to be praying.
Farrell entered his home to get some money, leaving shortly after and visiting one of the few shops in the town. Once he had purchased what he was looking for (or near enough as there was little choice in a town so small) he entered the temple.
Ignoring the beauty of the stained glass depicting the one winged goddess Micro, Farrell entered the main body of the temple, and sure enough, found his brother.
This time he was praying before the statue of the god Filis, a depiction of a young six-winged boy with long flowing hair and two long horns growing upwards from his head.
Trying to stifle his coughs at the overpowering smell of the incense that burned here, Farrell made himself known.
'Brother' Arlen said lifting his head. 'You're here.'
Farrell waved at the air before his face, trying to clear away the stuffy smell of the many scents that burned around him.
Arlen rose from his kneeling position, turning and facing Farrell. He immediately made an expression of disgust as he breathed in.
'You stink of perfume' Arlen told him.
'How can you smell anything but the incense in here?'
'You think the incense is overpowering?' Arlen asked him. 'Better than the cheap toilet water you're laced with. You've been whoring again haven't you.'
'You say it like it's a bad thing' Farrell replied.

‘It is a bad thing’ Arlen said flatly. ‘It’s disgusting. Those women aren’t from around here. Who knows where they’ve been or what they’ve been doing.’
‘Anyway’ Farrell sighed deliberately, changing the subject. ‘I brought you something.’
He unfolded the bundle he had been carrying, and held it up for Arlen to see.
‘It’s a cloak’ Farrell explained.
‘I can see that.’
It was a beautiful garment, crimson in shade with vividly detailed patterns and swirls. It looked very expensive, and must have taken weeks to make by skilled hands.
‘I know you’ve been feeling down lately’ Farrell went on. ‘So I thought I’d buy you a gift to cheer you up. It’s not much…but…’
‘No it’s lovely’ Arlen said, feeling the material. ‘Thank you. It was really nice of you to think of me like that.’
‘Of course’ Farrell said. ‘You're my brother. I care about you.’
Arlen took the cloak from Farrell, sweeping it over his shoulders and straightening up.
‘How do I look?’ he asked Farrell.
‘In that bright red?’ Farrell grinned. ‘Like a jester’
‘You flatter me’ Arlen replied in a monotone.
‘Listen, Arlen’ Farrell began. ‘I couldn’t help but notice that you missed the fight the other day. I can’t keep making excuses for you just because you’re my brother.’
‘I know’ Arlen sighed bowing his head. ‘I just…I've got a lot on my mind.’
‘I know’ Farrell nodded. ‘But still...’
‘You know they only compliment you because you pay them’ Arlen said, deliberately changing the subject.
‘Who?’
‘The whores’ Arlen replied.
‘I prefer to call them ladies of the night’ Farrell answered. ‘And don’t change the subject.’
‘I prefer to call them what they are’ Arlen finished. ‘Whores.’
‘Well’ Farrell said clapping his hands together. ‘I had better be on my way. I need some fresh air from this stuffy place.’
Farrell left his brother behind in the temple, heading home again. Along the way he was stopped by a figure, the Duke Bairn.
‘Farrell!’ the Duke called, hobbling he struggled to keep up with the soldiers brisk march. ‘May I have a word?’
‘Of course my lord’ Farrell replied respectfully as he turned back to face the man. ‘How can I help you?’
‘I just wanted to congratulate you on your promotion. I know that was a short time ago now, and I should have done it sooner…but I've been so busy with all the worries a Duke must suffer.’
‘I understand’ Farrell said, ‘and thank you for your concern my lord.’
‘And!’ Bairn added hastily as Farrell made to turn away. ‘Just one more thing’ the Duke went on, as Farrell turned back to him. ‘I wish to introduce you to someone. My daughter.’
‘Daughter?’ Farrell questioned. ‘I didn’t know you had a daughter.’
‘Few do’ Bairn admitted. ‘I've had many children…as you know. And I have lost many also. Over the years I have cared greatly for each, but my daughter…she is something special. Of

all the children I've had, nearly twenty in number, I have only even had one daughter. Isn't that strange?'
'Most would consider so many sons a blessing' Farrell told him.
'Which I have' Bairn replied. 'But losing so many children takes its toll. I have become somewhat protective of her. I've kept her hidden, until she is ready to face the world outside.'
'I understand' Farrell nodded. 'I perhaps would do the same.'
'I want you to meet her' Bairn repeated. 'Can you spare a moment of your time for that?'
'But of course' Farrell said.
'Wonderful' the Duke cried joyfully, a great big grin crossing his face. 'I'll bring her over now.' He turned, calling towards the corner of one of the houses. 'Ramana!'
Farrell cast his eyes to the ground, expecting to see a young girl, a child. Instead, his sight was met with the lower half of a dress, coming from around the corner. He looked up, giving a slight gasp without realising it, as he gazed into the face of the Duke's daughter.
She was spectacular. A woman of such celestial beauty, that a mere glance from her would set men falling at her feet.
She approached him.
'This is Ramana' the Duke introduced as she stopped beside her father. 'She is eighteen now, a mature woman. She takes after her mother more than she does myself; but I'm sure you can tell that already' he chuckled.
With such beauty unmatched, Farrell was at a loss at what to say as he gazed upon her magnificence. Radiant and stunning, her long silky black hair cascaded down to the bottom of her back. She wore a vivid red dress that ran across her shoulders.
Ramana took a breath. Her nose wrinkled as she smelt the perfume on Farrell.
'It's a pleasure to meet you' Farrell dipped his head, never taking his eyes from her.
She nodded back to him, thought did not speak, and nothing in her expression conveyed what she was thinking.
'Ramana, would you excuse us for a moment?' Bairn asked her kindly. 'I wish to speak now with Farrell alone.'
Ramana bowed her head obediently, and silently she walked away from them.

Arlen was just leaving the temple at this time, walking with eyes down and staring at his own feet. He lifted his head, just as a woman was approaching him.
The world seemed to slow. Arlen turned towards the woman just as she passed him by, so near to him she was.
His heart stopped, his eyes grew wide, and his breath was completely stolen away.
He slowed to a stop, staring after her as she walked away. She did not acknowledge him, but seemed to be in a world of her own.
Arlen stayed rooted to the spot, frozen. He could not move.

'Arlen?'
Arlen turned.
'Are you alright?' Farrell asked him. 'You look like you've seen a ghost.'
Arlen seemed to compose himself. He took a deep breath.

‘No’ he said. ‘Not a ghost.’
Arlen glanced back towards the direction he had been staring. ‘Tell me’ he said to Farrell. ‘Who is that woman?’
Farrell looked past him, and towards the small figure walking away in the distance. ‘That’s Ramana’ he told Arlen. ‘The Duke’s daughter.’
‘Daughter?’ Arlen tore his eyes away. ‘I didn’t know he had a daughter.’
‘Neither did I’ Farrell agreed, ‘until a moment ago.’
‘Where’s she been all this time?’ Arlen asked.
‘Under lock and key.’
‘What?’
‘The Duke has been very protective of her, she is his only daughter after all, and he has lost so many children in the past.’
‘Oh’ Arlen said, looking away again, but by that time Ramana was out of sight.
Arlen’s shoulders sagged. He then gave his full attention back to Farrell.
‘You mean he’s kept her locked away all this time?’
‘That’s what he said’ Farrell sighed, crossing his arms.
Arlen shook his head. ‘That’s so wrong.’
Farrell gave his brother a curious look.
‘To keep someone locked away their whole lives…’ Arlen went on, ‘it’s just….wrong.’
He was distracted from his thoughts however, when two women, who’s attention he had unwillingly attracted, sailed over to him.
‘Ooohhh’ the women cooed, flanking Arlen and running their hands up and down his body, admiring his princely features.
Arlen immediately tensed at this.
‘What a handsome man you are’ one of the women said.
‘Why don’t you come with us?’ The other woman said, nuzzling into his neck and stroking his clean-shaven face. ‘We’ll look after you.’
‘We’ll make you feel *special*’ the other woman winked at him.
Arlen glanced at both of them, giving them a sceptical and confused expression.
‘It’s the middle of the day’ he said to them.
Farrell threw his head back and laughed.

Sometime later, when Arlen had managed to shake off both women, he followed the path Ramana had taken back to her home. But when he got there, he found the great gates to the Duke’s estate tightly shut. He stood before them for a moment as he contemplated, then went away to think. But he didn’t go to the temple, this time he wanted to be completely alone, away from even the holy women. This time he went to the forest, where it was quietest. And there he sat, and thought.

Chapter Three
The Wall

The days stretched into weeks, and Ramana had not ventured from the manor or its grounds since the day Arlen had seen her for the very first time.

It was midday now, and Arlen had been sitting on this rock for far too long. He decided it was time to leave. Leaning forwards and groaning at the aches in his body he rose to stand, straightening up with great effort, stretching his muscles which had become stiff. Arlen slowly made his way down the hill, away from the manor he had been watching over, and back towards the town. There was nowhere he was expected to be that day, and so he headed home. Only because he was hungry, otherwise he would have gone to the temple instead.

But when he reached his front door minutes later, there was a shock waiting for him.

'What's this?' Arlen protested.

The one man in the world he didn't want to deal with rounded on him with a sour expression and a finger in his chest.

'You've had your last warning' the landlord growled, jabbing Arlen again. 'If you refuse to pay your rent, then you can sleep in the fields.'

'No!' Arlen cried in panic. 'Please.'

'Spare me your excuses' the landlord went on, turning from him and hammering another plank across the front door. 'I don't want to hear your petty sob stories. I don't care. I have a business to run. If people don't want to pay their rent then that's not my problem.'

'Please' Arlen begged. 'You can't kick me out.'

'Then pay what you owe' the landlord said, lowering the hammer and facing Arlen.

'I don't have any money' Arlen admitted, his whole body sagging as he said this.

The landlord turned away again, and began hammering up another plank. 'Then I hope you don't mind being trodden on by cows in the middle of a cold night.'

'Winfred' came another voice.

The landlord and Arlen both glanced round, seeing Farrell standing there.

'Now I don't want trouble from you' the landlord began, scowling at Farrell. 'You may be a respected man but this building belongs to me, and I don't offer it out of charity.'

'I apologise for any inconvenience caused' Farrell said to the man in a dead tone. He pulled out a pouch from one of his pockets and handed it to the landlord. 'I hope this will clear any problems you have with my brother.'

The landlord took the pouch suspiciously. Farrell walked past the both of them, only offering Arlen the briefest of acknowledgments.

'My goodness' the landlord exclaimed as he counted the coins in the pouch. 'There's enough rent here for an entire year! Well…you must be doing *something* right for your brother to care so much about you.'

Arlen gave him a flat expression.

'Well…' the landlord bobbed at him suddenly cheery. 'Good day to you. And be sure to get rid of these planks from the door, they look unsightly.'

Arlen glared at Winfred as he bounced away, feeling only cold in his heart. And then he felt worry.

'Farrell!'

He ran to catch his brother up.

'I don't want to hear it' Farrell droned.

‘Listen.’ Arlen continued anyway. ‘I promise I’ll pay you back…and thank you’ he added hastily.
‘It’s not about the money’ Farrell sighed in exasperation, coming to a halt to speak to Arlen. ‘We both know you haven’t any money and paying that amount is no trouble for me.’
‘Thanks’ Arlen repeated, sarcastically now. ‘Thanks for outlining my shortcomings.’
‘Oh for gods sake don’t make this personal’ Farrell groaned walking away again.
‘You started to make this personal’ Arlen called after him.
Farrell stopped. He turned back and marched up to Arlen.
‘You think you can blame your failures on other people?’ he snarled losing his temper. ‘I stick my neck out for you, I cover up for your absences and time and again you let me down.’
‘You think I let you down?’ Arlen hissed back.
Farrell grabbed him by the front of his shirt, shaking him roughly. ‘Every time you fail to show up for duty, it looks bad on me. My own brother.’
‘I'm sorry I'm such a burden to you’ Arlen said flatly.
Farrell shoved him back.
‘Gods I've never known anyone so *selfish*’ he spat. ‘You drift around from one day to the next living in your own little world. You see nothing around you beyond your own interests. It hurts Brice and me to see you like this. But the one person in life you’re hurting most of all is yourself. You just don’t see it.’
Farrell turned on his heel and stormed off, leaving Arlen to wallow in his misery.
After a time, Arlen decided to move. He didn’t want to go home; he wasn’t that hungry after all he decided. So instead, he returned to his rock, and continued his vigil over the Duke’s manor.
He had spent hours that day, like many before that, just sitting and watching the manor, hoping for even a brief glimpse of Ramana. But on this day, like the last and many before that, there was not even a whisper from her.

‘I'm worried about Arlen’ Farrell said as he entered Brice’s home, not even bothering to knock.
Brice glanced up from his meal, his wife Alice and his son Shawn were sat around the table with him.
‘I hear what you're saying’ Brice replied, not at all surprised to see Farrell there. The brothers were far too familiar with one another to bother announcing their arrivals. ‘He’s been so distracted lately, even more so than usual.’
‘My lady’ Farrell bowed to Alice respectfully as she smiled welcomingly at him. ‘How are you today?’
‘Oh I am quite well’ she beamed back. ‘Please, have a seat.’
‘Are you hungry?’ Brice asked Farrell as he drew up a chair.
‘No’ Farrell replied. ‘Thank you. I'm too worried to feel hungry.’
‘So what's wrong with Arlen then?’ Shawn asked Farrell, admiration glowing in his eyes at the sight of the prodigy.
‘I'm honestly not entirely sure’ Farrell admitted. ‘He’s so distracted all the time. I sometimes feel he doesn’t even notice me when I'm speaking directly to him. He’s not even visiting the temple like he used to. In fact I've hardly seen him there in weeks.’

‘I've hardly seen him at all’ Brice added. ‘I feel sort of bad about it, but he does like to wander off.’ He lowered his fork, regarding Farrell closely. ‘If he’s not going to the temple anymore, then where’s he going instead?’
Farrell shrugged. ‘His favourite spot now seems to be a rock he likes to sit on.’
‘And where is this rock?’ Alice interrupted.
‘It’s…’ Farrell began, ‘outside the Duke’s manor.’
Alice began to chuckle lightly at this, shaking her head at the ignorance of the two soldiers that shared her table.
‘You men’ she sighed, calming herself. ‘You really are so blind aren’t you?’
‘What do you mean?’ Farrell asked her uncertainly.
‘Don’t you see?’ Alice told him with a smile, picking up her fork and chasing the food across her plate. ‘It’s so blatantly obvious. Arlen is in love.’
‘In love?’ Brice shared a confused expression with Farrell. ‘But Arlen has never been interested in any particular woman; he’s never found the right one he’s told us.’
‘Well…’Alice smiled playfully. ‘Now he has.’

The next day, Arlen returned to his rock outside the walls of the manor. And there he waited, there he watched.
It was many hours later in the day, when the sun was beginning to dip and the sky darken, that he heard a sound. Something beautiful.
A heavenly voice, sailing up from behind the wall. Arlen heard it.
It was truly angelic, holy, and almost eerie. The voice seemed to echo, stretching far and wide. Arlen was mesmerized.
Very slowly, he rose from the rock he sat on, forgetting his stiff and aching muscles, and wandered closer towards the wall. Beyond the wall, just on the other side, an angel sang.
The voice, so beautiful, and so sad moved him. He longed so strongly to be on the other side of the wall. With her.
With Ramana.
The voice sang in a language he did not understand, so high, so light.
So perfect.
Arlen reached forwards, touching the stone of the wall which had cooled as the day grew late. He listened to the final notes of the song, before everything went quiet again.

He stepped back, withdrawing his hand from the wall, and realised a tear had run down his cheek. Arlen caught it with the tip of a finger, staring at it closely as the last rays of the sun dipped behind the hills on the horizon.
He looked up again at the wall that was so tall before him, towering over him; thinking of the woman on the other side.
He took a breath, calming his racing heart.
‘Ramana…’ he whispered to the night.

Arlen's rest was uneasy that night, he was thinking only of the voice, which haunted him now, echoing in his dreams as he tossed and turned.
He woke with a start, sweating and panting. Throwing the thin sheets back and swinging his legs over the side of the bed. He sat there on the edge, elbows rested on his knees and head in his hands.
He straightened, turning behind him to face his bedroom window and looking to the world beyond. The very first hints of the coming day were creeping into the sky. He abandoned thoughts of any more sleep, instead he rose and got dressed, leaving his home early and heading to the forest. The little birds were beginning to sing now, having woken with the first hints of morning light, as he had done.
So fresh was the air, so clean and still, everything was so tranquil. There was not a soul other than himself that Arlen saw in the town as he passed through. Never the less, he moved quickly, not wanting to be seen, only wanting to be alone with his thoughts at this time.
His pace slowed after he passed the border of the woods, the first trees were small and grew far apart, but as he ventured further, the woods became thicker and wilder.
It was many hours he walked, heading deeper into the forest. If someone was to go searching for him here now, they would never find him. And that was the way Arlen liked it.

Back in the town, a group of men on horseback were gathering in preparation for the next big fight. Farrell's eyes slid over the faces of the men, searching for Arlen, and growing ever more annoyed when he didn't find him. He shot a furious glare at Brice behind him, who shrugged, exasperated.
Farrell ground his teeth in anger, huffing as he placed the helmet upon his head. He called to his men.
'WE RIDE WEST!'
As the men rode the many miles, they were met with several other groups along the way, and by the time they arrived at their destination hours later, the mass was now thousands strong.
Riding under the banner of the king, Farrell formed the army ready to charge. He raised his sword to signal, and men behind him blew on horns the order to attack. With Brice close by his side Farrell led the army towards their enemy. The sound of the horse's hooves thundering on the ground was terrifying enough; the beasts specially trained for war did not hesitate as they crashed into the lines of their foe. The king, mounted on his white stallion and standing at a safe distance upon a hilltop, watched as the highest ranking soldier in his kingdom led his men to a decisive victory. Surrounded by his guards, he watched as the battle turned into a slaughter.
The enemy had been vanquished, and as Farrell broke away from the fight, he was met by the king. Farrell dismounted, bowing low to the king, showing his utter respect and loyalty.

Back in the woods near the town of Ketts, so far away from the bloodshed and violence, Arlen walked. It was a lonely world. The trees were so thick, that no wind could penetrate here, and everything was utterly still. Save for the birds that could not be seen, but whose calls could be heard as far as one could walk and still remain in the forest.

His footsteps were light on the forest floor as he made his way slowly forwards, heading in no particular direction.
Arlen stopped for a moment, noticing something.
It was raining all around him, not water, but seeds. He cast his hand out, catching one of the seeds in his open palm. It was a sycamore seed. Everywhere they were falling to the ground, their descent slowed by the fan that sprouted out from the centre, causing them to spin continually, until they landed gently on the forest floor.
And then, he was struck with an idea.

Farrell and Brice returned home with the other soldiers some days later, very few of which had been lost. Farrell had washed the blood from him before he began his journey, now clean he walked Alastor slowly through the town. He was heading to his home when he saw Arlen at a distance, sitting outside the Duke's manor. Farrell was about to confront him, and demand why he had not been present where he was expected to join in the battle, but something held him back. It was some strange feeling inside that he could not explain. Farrell pulled the reins back lightly, and Alastor obediently slowed to a stop. Farrell stayed for a moment, watching Arlen sitting on that same rock he had been for days, and staring towards the Duke's manor, seemingly oblivious that he was being watched.
'Let's leave him to it' Brice suggested, coming to stand beside Farrell on his own horse.
Briefly, Farrell remembered the words that Alice had spoken days before.
Don't you see? It's so blatantly obvious. Arlen is in love.
Farrell shook his head.
'I will never understand him' he sighed to Brice. 'He is our brother, yet he is so different from us.'
'That he is' Brice nodded. 'That he is.'
The two of them moved away, leaving Arlen alone.

Arlen waited until his brothers were far away, before pulling from his coat the thing he had created, the thing he had been hiding. It had taken a few hours to make, but a few days to perfect.
Like the sycamore seed, it had a large fan protruding from its centre, and like the sycamore seed, would fall the same way. The entire thing was made of paper, and was very light in weight, so would fall slowly.
Inside the middle piece, was a ring made of flowers. The flowers, once picked, would last only hours. Like all beauty, it was fleeting.
Arlen rose from the rock; taking several steps back he threw the thing as hard as he could, finally succeeding to get it over the wall only after several attempts. It was so light; it didn't travel far when thrown, but indeed fell slowly, as he had designed it to. Quickly he slipped away, returning to his home, to think of the next thing he could create to send over the wall, and convince the beautiful maiden inside to emerge from her fortress. He became very excited.
What wonderful thing could I do next? He thought happily.

Days later

Arlen glanced up from where he sat upon the hill. From here he could see the field belonging to Farrell in which the stallion Alastor now shared with the mares. He would interact with them constantly in a quiet affiliation. Restless and alert, the stallion would wander about the heard, nudging them frequently and raising his head, his upper lip curled back.
Arlen recognised this courting behaviour, and thought to himself with a smile, *you will sire many strong and handsome foals, black and beautiful like yourself.*
Nearby, his brothers Farrell and Brice practiced sword fighting together, swinging their blunted weapons and dancing back and forth in perfect motion.
Arlen returned his attention back to his own, sitting with the large sketchbook open on his lap. He lifted the coloured pencil, adding the details to the picture he saw before him. He was interrupted moments later when a shadow fell across his page.
'Hey!' Arlen protested. 'You're getting in the way of the light.'
Farrell frowned down at him, stepping to the side out of Arlen's way. Arlen shot him a glare of annoyance quickly before returned to his drawing.
'Since when do you draw silly pictures?' Farrell asked him.
Arlen pursed his lips, gritting his teeth; his brow furrowed impatiently.
'It may be silly to you, but some people appreciate the beauty of art.'
'I'm sorry brother' Farrell said hastily. 'I didn't mean any offence by it.'
Arlen shot him a dark look, turning the other way and sitting now with his back to Farrell.
'We were wondering' Farrell went on, ignoring this behaviour, 'if you wanted to come and practice with us.'
'I'm afraid I'm busy' Arlen replied shortly. 'Just go back and return to playing your games with Brice.'
'War is not a game' Farrell replied sternly. 'And weapons are not toys.'
Arlen gave no response to this, so enveloped was he in his drawing.
Farrell sighed shaking his head, moving away from him and shrugging at Brice who waited nearby. The two returned to their sparring, as Arlen added the finishing touches to his work.
'There' he said with satisfaction when it was complete. 'It is done.'
He tore the page out of the book, glancing back at his brothers who were completely distracted with their fighting. Rolling the page up, and leaving the book and pencils where they were, he slipped away.
Sometime later, his brothers noticed he had gone, seeing the empty page in the book and the pencils left behind.
'Where did he go?' Farrell asked curiously.
'I think I know' Brice replied, his attention drifting towards the Duke's manor.

Arlen tip-toed along the boundaries of the Duke's home, holding in one hand the drawing he had rolled up. He tied a weight to the paper with a piece of red cloth, backing away he threw the rock, aiming as high as he could. The red fabric trailed through the air as it flew over the wall.

Within the garden behind the high walls, Ramana sat waiting. She saw as the thing fell into the garden, landing with a thud on the grass. Ramana stood, sauntering over towards the item. She bent down and untied the beautiful red fabric, unrolling the paper. She held the large drawing in both her hands, smiling down at it.
She recognised the glowing pink blossoms of the trees that were drawn in the background of the picture, as the ones that grew near her home. In the foreground, growing amongst the tall sweeping grass were lilies, coloured pure white and lightning blue. And scattered throughout the picture, beneath the trees and wading through the grasses, were mother horses with their foals. In the centre of the picture, rearing up dramatically with mane tossed back was a mighty black stallion. The picture was beautifully drawn and intricately detailed.
Ramana smiled widely, putting a hand over her mouth. The edges of her eyes crinkled. She lifted her head up towards the wall, thinking of the one on the other side.
Her heart beat heavy in her chest, and she longed to see the man on the other side of the wall, longed to know who he was. She rolled the picture up again, holding it to her, her eyes shimmering.
She left the garden, creeping through the corridors of her home quietly and returning to her bedroom. Ramana unrolled the picture again, placing it upon the wall. She took a step back, admiring the drawing in all its splendour.
Ramana was happy.

It was the next day that Arlen was in the forest, having risen early that morning, as he had so many mornings before that. As had become habit. He slept little nowadays, and when he did, his dreams were dominated night after night, by that voice.
Today, Arlen found his wandering feet had taken him to a small pond deep within the woods. A beautiful place it was, much like the rest of the forest. But the pond made him stop, so tranquil was the sound of the trickling water of the little river that ran into it.
Arlen rested on his knees, placing the things he had brought with him on the ground beside him. Pots of paint, paper of different colours, some thick card, and some paper thin enough to see through, ribbons and cloth of several different materials and string also. Arlen poured gleefully over the items he had brought with him, thinking about what he should do with them.
Sometime later he had created a large butterfly. With a painted twig body, its wings were made of many different colours of the thin paper, held together at the edges with thin twigs bent around.
Arlen smiled at it. He had finished, and it looked beautiful.
Arlen turned it over in his hands, examining it closely, wondering if there was anything else he could add to it, when he noticed a ripple on the water of the pond.
Arlen raised his head and gasped as he saw a figure.
It was Ramana. She had followed him into the woods earlier that morning, and watched from a distance as he worked.
She stood there, peering at Arlen closely as he sat there in shock and awe of her beauty.
And then she smiled.

Sometime later, the soldiers were gathering once again in the centre of the town for battle. Farrell wheeled his black stallion around, the feisty beast tossed its head as it moved, excited by the commotion. Farrell surveyed the bustling scene. As always Brice was by his side, mounted on his own chestnut stallion. But this time, much to the surprise of both Farrell and Brice, Arlen was present also.

'Arlen' Brice said. 'You're here.'

Arlen answered his brother only with a flash of teeth. He was smiling. Farrell hummed thoughtfully to himself at this, but said nothing. He signalled to the men around him, commanding them, and sending them out of the town and onwards.

Chapter Four
Plans for the Future

Arlen sat on the wall of the fountain in the town, feeling better now than he had done in years. He had had no trouble from his landlord for quite some time now, and both his brothers seemed to be in better moods with him. But above all, Arlen thought with a silent smile to himself, he had gotten *her* attention.

'Life is finally looking up for me' he muttered to himself under his breath. 'Perhaps the gods have heard my prayers at last.'

He suddenly noticed a figure in the distance watching him. Ramana waved to him playfully. He beaconed for her to come over, but she would only wave at him back, teasing him on.

Arlen frowned at her in mock annoyance, amused by her behaviour. He rose from his seat, making his way towards her, but was suddenly blocked by another figure.

'Sue' Arlen stammered. 'What are you doing here?'

The pretty young girl cocked her head at him curiously, dressed in regal clothes with very long hair, coloured straw-blonde and wavy. She was the daughter of an important lord, and many sought her attention. But she only had eyes for one man.

'Arlen' she said, in a sombre voice. 'It's been too long since I've seen you. Where have you been?'

'Oh' Arlen said casually, glancing over her shoulder towards Ramana, 'just here and there.'

Sue looked around towards Ramana. 'Who is that woman?'

'Oh her?' Arlen said nonchalantly. 'I barely know her.'

Sue turned back to Arlen, glaring at him, betrayal written all over her face. 'You're lying.'

Arlen waved at Ramana helplessly, but she simply made gestures at him as if struggling to hear. Then she ran away. Arlen could hear very faintly, her giggles as she danced off. Now he was alone.

'Are you cheating on me?' Sue demanded of him. 'You know my father would not approve of this.'

'But we're not together' Arlen protested, backing off.

She descended upon him, trapping Arlen between herself and the water fountain behind him.
‘He has already made arrangements’ she told him vaguely.
Arlen’s heart began to sink in his chest. Her father was a terrifying, hawk-faced man with a temper, and Arlen was even more frightened of him than he was of Sue. The spoilt little rich girl. Both father and daughter were the same. But the father was worse, because he had more power and influence.
‘But…but…’ Arlen fumbled. ‘I don’t have any money.’
‘*I* have money’ Sue told him, raising her voice. ‘Money can buy you anything and everything. And I can have whatever I want.’
Arlen gulped, seeing his life flash before his eyes.
‘Think of the handsome children we could have’ Sue told him. ‘Arlen? Arlen! Are you alright?’
Arlen stumbled, holding the wall behind him for support.
‘I'm feeling suddenly faint’ he said, in a weak voice.

‘Why Arlen’ Ramana teased as he rounded the corner moments later. ‘I've never seen such acting.’
Arlen jumped at the sound of her voice, not expecting to see her there.
‘Yes’ he agreed composing himself. ‘I am rather fabulous. I was able to slip away when she ran to get a healer.’
‘That was very sly of you’ she told him. ‘What will she think when she comes back?’
‘I know, but how else could I get away?’ Arlen shrugged.
‘I'm surprised you *wanted* to get away, from a pretty little flower like that.’
‘Beauty is more than skin deep. Oh’ Arlen sighed deeply, touching a hand to his heart. ‘But what a curse it is to be so handsome.’
Ramana laughed out loud at this.
‘You're so melodramatic’ she told him. ‘And ever so vain.’
‘Only when I need to be’ he winked at her. ‘And anyway’ he continued. ‘You're not one to talk.’
She smirked at him, rolling her shoulders and swaying her hips. She strolled away from him, pausing to glance back. Arlen watched her go; he waited for a moment, before following.

Farrell twirled his sword, dancing back and stepping to the side. Brice scowled at him, hiding behind his own shield.
‘Now you're showing off’ Brice grumbled.
‘Come on’ Farrell chuckled, ‘hit me.’
Brice charged forwards, swinging his sword back to strike. Farrell met his blow with ease, pushing him back again and lunging forwards. For hours the two fought together under the hot sun, fixed in concentration on each other. At last they came to rest, sitting on the grass and panting.
‘Perhaps I can get us something to drink’ Farrell suggested wiping his brow.
‘That would be lovely’ Brice gasped, getting his breath back.

Farrell leant back, waving at the servant that waited on the edge of the field. She bowed to him, rushing inside the manor, returning moments later with a jug of cold water and two glasses.
'Thank you Amy' Farrell said gratefully, pouring himself a glass and drinking deeply.
The servant bowed and retreated, returning to her spot on the edge of the field and waiting submissively for her next command.
Together Farrell and Brice rested; swords and shields left on the grass nearby. They watched as Alastor grazed in the field, swishing his tail at the flies. His mares grazed around him in the field, all sticking close to the stallion.
'Do you think Arlen would like to join us?' Brice asked, taking another sip of cold water.
'He seems to have been in a better mood of late' Farrell noted. 'Maybe this time he will say yes. I'll go find him.'
'I'll wait here' Brice called happily after him as he left. 'I'll guard the water' he said, raising his glass.
Farrell marched swiftly through the town, heading for Arlen's home. He approached the building, entering the front door without bothering to knock and nearly running headlong into a figure.
Farrell stumbled back in surprise, blinking stupidly at the woman standing in the doorway before him.
'Ramana' he breathed. 'What are you doing here?'
She averted her eyes, lifting her dress higher up her shoulder and leaning against the wall for support. Farrell noticed suddenly how messy her hair was, at this point his attention drifted into the room within, where he saw Arlen, looking equally as dishevelled and more than a little guilty.
'Arlen' Farrell said.
'Brother' Arlen answered curtly back.
'I uh…' Farrell began. 'I've forgotten why I came here.' He glanced at Ramana, nodding to her. And then he left.

It was late that night when Ramana returned home, creeping up the stone steps and slipping as silently as she could through the entrance. She closed the door after her, finding the room inside was pitch black, but it was far from deserted. The moment she took a step forward, two shadows appeared either side of her, flanking her. Ramana stumbled back in shock, drawing a deep breath ready to scream, but then a fire sprang to life, and Ramana saw the figures of Eidan and Markus before her.
'I'm sorry if we startled you sister' Eidan said, holding the lantern in one hand. 'We were waiting for you.'
'For me?' Ramana asked guiltily, letting out a deep breath and brushing herself down. 'Why were you waiting for me? And why are you sitting in the dark?'
'We were waiting for a long time' Markus answered.
'So why were you waiting so long for me?'
'We want to know of this new man you've found yourself' Markus said. 'He is a handsome one.'
'You mean Arlen?'

‘Arlen’ Markus repeated. ‘We know of him, that’s Farrell’s brother isn’t it?’
‘How do you know?’ Ramana asked.
‘Oh dear sister’ Eidan beamed. ‘We have ears and we have eyes. We’ve seen the way you look at him.’
‘You must tell us about him’ Markus said. ‘Tell us what he’s like. He is good to you I hope.’
‘Oh’ Ramana sighed, holding her hands over her heart. ‘He is wonderful.’

‘I've never met anyone like her before’ Arlen went on. ‘She’s so funny; she makes me laugh at the silliest of things, and she’s happy all the time. I just wish I could spend more time with her, everyday if I could.’
‘And every night’ Farrell teased.
‘My goodness me’ Brice said to Arlen. ‘This *must* be true love. I've never seen you blush before.’
‘We’re happy for you brother’ Farrell said, handing him another drink. ‘Aren’t we Brice?’
‘Oh yes’ Brice nodded vigorously. ‘Very happy.’
‘It’s good to see you smile at last’ Farrell said to Arlen. ‘I mean…*really* smile.’
Farrell took another drink from the tray the servant held, and for once, Arlen did not object to this. The three of them sat before Farrell’s home, watching the horses in the field nearby, and the sun setting in the distance. They listened to Arlen prattle on about all the things he found most wonderful about Ramana, and he spoke long into the evening. Eventually however, Arlen and Brice had to leave as the night drew on. Brice walked from Farrell’s manor alone, and when he entered his own home, his wife was waiting for him in the kitchen.
‘You’ve been a while’ Alice noted. ‘Is everything alright?’
‘Yes’ Brice smiled. ‘Everything is alright.’
‘You seem to be in a particularly good mood’ she noticed. ‘Did I miss out on something?’
‘No, nothing at all.’
‘Then what is it?’ Alice asked with interest.
‘It’s Arlen…he’s…happy.’

The next day

The sunlight above cast moving patterns though the leaves upon the forest floor. Shielding his eyes Arlen squinted at Ramana as she lay next to him. She grinned at him cheekily.
‘I like it when you make funny faces’ she said.
‘I'm not making funny faces’ he told her indignantly. ‘This is just my face.’
She giggled at him, rolling onto her side she propped herself up on an elbow, resting her head in a hand.
‘You're so cute’ she said to him.
‘I'm not trying to be cute.’
‘I know’ she beamed back. ‘That’s what I find cutest of all.’
Arlen lowered his hand, turning his head to face her properly as he rested on his back against the cool grass in the forest.

‘You say the silliest things sometimes’ he smiled warmly.
She glowed, looking ever more beautiful.
‘So’ she said to him, tickling him as he tried to squirm away from her. ‘A handsome man such as yourself chased by every woman who lays eyes on you….what made you choose me?’
‘What do you mean?’ Arlen asked her, weaving his fingers through hers.
‘I mean…’ she chuckled, poking his nose. ‘Why did you fall in love with me? I didn’t know who you were when you started sending me gifts.’ Her eyes glistened as she watched him closely, waiting for a response. ‘What was it about me that you liked?’
‘It was love at first sight’ Arlen breathed, never taking his eyes from her.
‘But women throw themselves at your feet’ Ramana told him. ‘Why haven’t you fallen for any of *them*?’
‘It’s not like that’ Arlen said frowning and shoving her lightly.
Ramana flicked his hand away, pushing him back and giggling.
‘Women don’t throw themselves at my feet’ Arlen told her.
‘Yes they do.’
‘No’ Arlen said in mock irritation. ‘They don’t.’
‘Well’ Ramana continued. ‘Why didn’t you like any of them?’
‘I was waiting for the right person’ Arlen replied.
‘But why were none of them *the right person*?’ She asked him.
‘You mean those pampered spoilt women who think they are better than everyone else because they are richer, or better looking? Or because their parents are important people? The type of woman who spends hours every day painting her face and preening herself? The type of women who has so little care in the world besides themselves, they spend hours living inside their own heads? You want to know why I'm not interested in *them*?’
‘Alright’ Ramana smiled, satisfied at the answer. ‘What was it about me that made you fall in love with me before you even knew me?’
‘It was what I saw about you’ Arlen grinned.
‘What do you mean?’ Ramana asked teasingly.
‘I have seen so many women of the type who choose to spend their whole lives inside, knowing nothing of the real world. Not even caring to find out, women who do nothing with their lives. But when I saw you, I saw the kind of person you are.’
‘Oh?’ Ramana winked, curious now.
Arlen reached forward, brushing her hair back.
‘You look so beautiful all the time’ he told her. ‘But I like it best when your hair is down.’
‘It’s a good thing I always have it down then’ Ramana said, resting her head against the ground with her hands stuck out before her, poking Arlen’s stomach repeatedly.
Arlen tried to fend her off, waving his hands at her.
‘I saw a lot about your character that day’ Arlen continued, catching her waving hands in his. ‘That day you walked past me. That day I first laid eyes upon you, I saw your beauty and magnificence.’
‘Oh stop’ she laughed, slapping his shoulder lightly.
He flicked her nose playfully in response.

‘Go on’ Ramana told him when they had calmed again. ‘What did you see about my character?’
‘You're fingers’ he told her.
‘Fingers?’ she made a funny face at him. ‘You fell in love with me because of my fingers?’
‘Yes. I mean no.’ Arlen made a sound of exasperation. ‘You had paint on your fingers’ Arlen went on, ‘which means you like to paint, you are creative. There were twigs in your hair, and dirt on your dress that made it look like you had been kneeling. I thought you perhaps like to garden, maybe you like flowers; maybe you have a collection of them. And the twigs in your hair, how did they get there? Were you walking through the woods, or perhaps climbing a tree? You didn’t wear any makeup, but you were more beautiful without it. You dressed in vibrant red and walked with your head held high; I saw you were a confident person, proud, and strong. That is the woman I have spent my life searching for, that is the woman I want to spend the rest of my life with. And when I heard you sing…’ Arlen took a deep breath. ‘I was completely blown away.’
Ramana smiled proudly at Arlen. She leant forward to kiss him.
They only rose, when the darkness began to set. Night was coming, and already the first stars in the sky could be seen growing stronger.
‘Goodnight’ Ramana breathed. ‘My heavenly prince.’
Arlen smiled widely, the edges of his eyes crinkled in pure joy. He bowed low to Ramana, kissing the back of her hand as he did so. ‘Good night’ he said to her. ‘My queen.’
She pressed her body into his, the two of them becoming one.
‘I can’t wait for morning to come’ she said to him. ‘I ache every moment we are apart. I long only to be by your side once more.’
‘As do I’ Arlen smiled. ‘I will pray to the gods to make the moon travel faster across the sky, so that the sun may rise sooner.’
Ramana chuckled at this, nodding to him. ‘In that case I will pray also. Perhaps the gods are more likely to listen to both of us.’
‘I will see you in the morning’ Arlen said, reluctantly letting go of her. Suddenly he was filled with a strong desire to hold her again.
‘Goodnight’ Ramana said, slipping away from him. ‘My love.’
‘Until we meet again’ Arlen bowed. ‘Sleep well.’
Ramana curtsied to him, turning and striding away. She paused a short distance from him, glancing back. She grinned at him one last time, before slipping into the darkness.

The next morning, Arlen waited for her in the woods where they had the day before agreed to meet. But when Ramana appeared, Arlen was shocked to see her.
Ramana fell into his arms, crying hysterically.
‘What is it?!’ Arlen asked in alarm, fear clawing at his heart. ‘What's happened?’
‘Arlen!’ Ramana sobbed; eyes red and tears streaming down her cheeks. ‘I have some terrible news…’
Arlen met Farrell later that day in his manor.

‘Brother’ Farrell said in surprise as Arlen walked through the kitchen unannounced. ‘I didn’t hear you come in. Are you alright?’
‘Farrell’ Arlen spoke in a flat tone. ‘I need to speak to you.’

‘Goodnight’ Ramana breathed. ‘My heavenly prince.’
‘Until we meet again’ Arlen bowed. ‘Sleep well.’
Ramana curtsied to him, turning and striding away. She paused a short distance from him, glancing back. She grinned at him one last time, before slipping into the darkness.
The night was quiet, and Ramana moved silently through the woods. Even in the failing light, she knew her way, so familiar with the forest she was. She found her path, out of the woods and through the town, heading to the small hill her father’s manor was built upon. She slipped through the large doors that guarded the grounds, skipping down the path and towards the manor. She entered quietly, closing the doors behind her gently so as not to make a noise. But she needn’t have bothered, her father and two brothers were awake, and they were waiting for her.
‘Sister’ the eldest brother Eidan said. ‘It’s late, and you’ve been out all day. Where have you been?’
‘I know’ the second brother, Markus the younger said. ‘You’ve been with Arlen.’
Ramana hunched her shoulders shyly, averting her eyes. Her father frowned at this.
‘Come here my daughter’ he said to her. ‘Come sit with us.’
Ramana obeyed, feeling slightly nervous, though she didn’t know why. She sat opposite her brothers who were both sitting, and her father who was standing. All three of them were huddled together.
‘What's all this about?’ she asked them uncertainly. ‘Why are you all here?’
‘We need to have a talk’ Bairn her father told her.
‘Have I done something wrong?’ Ramana worried. ‘Have I upset you?’
Bairn shared an uncertain look with his sons, who glanced at each other also.
‘You’ve done nothing wrong’ Eidan said. ‘We are not upset with you, we just….need to have a talk. That’s all.’
Ramana looked to each of them, however felt no better.
‘We’ve been talking’ Bairn began. ‘About children.’
‘Children?’ Ramana repeated flatly. ‘Now I am confused.’
‘It’s time you thought about children’ Bairn went on.
‘Why?’
‘Because your mother was your age when she had her first child.’
‘So?’ Ramana argued. ‘That doesn’t mean I have to live my life exactly as she’s lived hers.’
‘Oh dear’ her father sighed. ‘I forget sometimes how different you are from her, and from me.’ He ran his fingers through what little hair he had. ‘It’s time you started thinking about family’ Bairn persisted. ‘You must plan where you want your life to go from here.’
Ramana pursed her lips irritantly, her brows knitting together as she glowered in displeasure at her father.

‘You are young’ Bairn went on, oblivious to his daughter’s annoyance. ‘You will have many sons.’
‘Like you’ve had many sons?’ Ramana retorted.
Bairn fell into an impatient silence.
‘And anyway’ Ramana went on. ‘I want a daughter.’
‘Good lords’ Bairn sighed in exasperation. ‘You will have both sons and daughters and plenty of them.’
‘No I won’t.’
‘Why must you be so belligerent?’ her father cried in despair.
‘I am not a factory’ Ramana said crossing her arms and turning away in distain. ‘I will have as few or as many children as I please.’
‘Oh lords above’ Bairn sighed again. ‘You're mother was never like this. She always wanted children, even when she was young.’
‘I never said I didn’t want children’ Ramana went on. ‘I just meant I will have them when I am ready, *if* I am ready.’
‘I think we’ve started this on the wrong foot’ Eidan interrupted as Bairn groaned, walking away with his head in his hands in sheer frustration. ‘We didn’t wait hours for you to talk about children, but about husbands.’
‘Husbands?’
‘Yes’ Markus added. ‘Father wants you to marry Farrell.’
Ramana’s jaw fell open.
‘He is a good man’ Bairn began happily, glad that the topic had at last gotten to its point. ‘He would make a perfect husband. He is rich and powerful…he has a fine reputation. You would be respected greatly if you married him. Many people look to him with respect and awe, and jealously, some even with fear...I am sure. He is young still, he would likely give you many children, and he’s not unpleasant to look at. Your children would be handsome.’
‘I don’t want to marry him’ Ramana said flatly.
The following silence stretched on as the statement sunk in.
‘What?’
‘He’s not right for me’ Ramana told her father. ‘I want no man who keeps the company of whores. All those women hanging off him….how can any woman love a man like that?’
‘Men have needs’ Bairn shrugged. ‘I don’t excuse his behaviour, but…’ he shrugged again, casting a pleading look towards his two sons, a look that begged for help.
‘You will come to love him in time’ Eidan said rising to sit beside her, he took her by the hand. ‘I don’t know him personally, but I'm sure he is a good man when you get to know him.’
‘What makes you think that?’ Ramana asked him unconvinced.
‘He has wealth’ Markus said sitting the other side of her. ‘You don’t *have* you love him if you find that he is not right for you.’
‘But I love Arlen.’
‘I know’ Markus said sadly as he brushed her cheek with the back of his hand. ‘Dear sister. I know you love this man, but…’
Ramana fixed him with a pained expression as he spoke.
‘He could not possibly give you the life you deserve.’

‘But he loves me’ Ramana said weakly. ‘And I love him.’
‘We know’ Eidan said. ‘But you would live far more comfortably if you married Farrell.’
‘Life isn’t about wealth’ Ramana argued. ‘I don’t care about jewels and money. I just want to be happy.’
‘But think of the children you might have’ Markus added. ‘They would have a far better upbringing if you married a wealthy man.’
‘Just think’ Eidan went on, ‘you could give them the finest clothes…all the toys they could possibly want…’
‘They would have a better education’ Markus added. ‘They could go to better schools, have better homes when they grow up, and marry well. Your sons could provide well for any women they might want, and your daughters would be much sought after, they would have the first pick of any man they wished.’
Ramana gave an anguished sigh.
‘We only want what's best for you’ Eidan said. ‘We love you, and we want you to be happy.’
Ramana fixed him with a deep stare.
‘Just think about it’ Markus said. ‘Just promise us that.’
‘Alright’ Ramana mumbled unhappily. ‘I will.’
‘Thank you’ Markus beamed. He stroked her hair back, kissing her forehead before rising and walking away.
Eidan touched her at the chin, turning her face towards his and smiling kindly at her. ‘Farrell could give you a much better life than anyone could.’
He winked at her, before standing and following his brother out of the room.
‘See’ Eidan said to his father as he walked past him. ‘Understand from her point of view, and she will listen.’
Bairn frowned at his sons as they went by. He looked back at his daughter, who would not meet his gaze, and considered saying something else, but decided against it. He would most likely only irritate her, and undo the good words that his sons had spoken.
He simply gave a sigh; then left without a word. When she was alone, only then did Ramana move. She walked silently through the manor, and to her room. She blocked the door with a large wardrobe, then fell onto the bed, and cried.

‘Do you understand now?’ Arlen spoke to Farrell. ‘This is what I've been praying for’ Arlen told him seriously. ‘Remember, ages ago I told you…when you asked me what I pray…I told you I pray that when I meet the right woman, I can give her a good home, safety and wealth. I have none of those things, but I can still give them to her.’ He took a deep breath. ‘I believed that the gods would answer my prayer, but I did not think that it would be this way. The only way I can give her the life she deserves, is if I give her to you.’
‘Arlen…’ Farrell began shaking his head.
‘No’ Arlen interrupted sharply. ‘I have made my choice. Its time you were married anyway.’
‘I don’t want to marry her.’
You have money, a fine home.’

‘I don’t want to marry her’ Farrell repeated.
‘I believe you would care for her’ Arlen continued, ignoring his brother’s words.
‘Arlen’ Farrell said seriously. ‘I don’t love her.’
‘She is beautiful’ Arlen went on.’
‘I don’t care about beauty.’
‘She is a good woman’ Arlen said, voice breaking now. He grabbed Farrell by the shoulders, pulling him close. ‘If you care about me…if you *truly*…care about me…you would do this for me….for her…’
Arlen stared back at Farrell defiantly, tears brimming in his eyes.
‘But what about you?’ Farrell whispered.
‘I will be happy’ Arlen replied, letting go of his brother and backing off, ‘in the knowledge that she is in safe hands, and married…to someone I trust.’ Arlen took a slow and steady breath. ‘Look after her’ he said, ‘and…her children.’ He strode away, before Farrell could say another word.

It was the night before the wedding, and Ramana had spent her last day with Arlen. Now they lay alone together, in his home, in his bed. They lay side by side, staring up at the ceiling.
‘My brother is a good man’ Arlen said awkwardly. ‘He will look after you. He will treat you kindly.’
‘I'm sure I will find that out for myself’ Ramana mumbled.
Arlen turned away from her, failing to hold back the tears.
‘Arlen?’ she said. ‘Are you crying?’
She reached for him, turning his head back so that he faced her. ‘Please don’t cry’ she begged of him. ‘I hate to see you sad.’
‘I'm sorry’ Arlen whispered. ‘It’s just..…these last few days we’ve spent together…have been the happiest of my life.’
‘Mine too’ Ramana said. ‘Many years of my life I've spent behind walls, dreaming of being on the other side, wondering what was there…and then I found you.’ She lay back down, resting on her side now, her long silky black hair pooled around her head. She watched Arlen, never taking her eyes off his. ‘When you started sending those gifts over the wall, each time you sent another, I learnt a little more about you. Who you were, what you were like….I waited, for hours sometimes to see if you would send me anything on that day. I began to collect them, so that I might look back on them, and remember those days I looked forward to. I shall never forget.’
‘And I shall never forget how you made me laugh’ Arlen sighed. ‘Oh what fun we had.’
‘We did’ Ramana said, enthusiastically now. ‘Let us never forget those days. Let us always remember them, and let us not be sad.’
‘I know this is the last night I will have you, and that tomorrow you will belong to my brother, but…I just want you to know…that I will always love you, from now, until forever…no matter what. And…I just want you to know……. Farrell could give you a much better life than I ever could.’
‘Oh Arlen…’
He pulled her closer, feeling her naked skin against his.

‘Love me’ she whispered to him. ‘Just one last time.’
He leant forward to kiss her.

The next morning was spectacular. Every single person who lived in the town was present at the wedding, with eyes all turned to the bride.
Ramana took a deep and steady breath to calm her nerves, as she saw the crowd of people before her split roughly in half, walking down the path between them and feeling very uncomfortable at the staring faces all around. Her strides were wide, and her pace slow. She mounted the steps to stand before the holy man, looking utterly magnificent. Her luscious black hair was tied up, showing her long beautiful neck and shoulders. She wore a striking dress of bronze and dark green and other earthy colours. Running across her shoulders and trailing behind her as she walked. Her makeup was light but appealing, however felt strange and unfamiliar for her to wear.
A figure approached her from beside, and Ramana turned to see Farrell marching up the steps towards her, handsomely dressed and well presented.
He held out his arm, and she took it, only reluctantly. She glanced back to the crowd, where she spotted Arlen. He stood with his head high, and despite the words he had spoken to her the night before, Ramana could see the suffering in his eyes. All his words of confidence and encouragement, all of it had been lies. He didn’t want to let her go, but he did so, for her.
She remembered the words Arlen had said to her, the words her own brothers had said.
Farrell could give you a much better life than anyone could.
Ramana turned from him with head hung low. She faced the holy man before her, as did Farrell.
The holy man opened his hands, and smiled. He began his sermon, and shortly after, the couple were married.

Farrell walked the short distance back to his home, guiding behind him the dappled stallion, upon which Ramana sat.
They approached the manor, Farrell bringing the stallion around to the front steps. He helped Ramana down, watching her sternly; she almost shrank from his gaze, dipping her head.
Farrell took her hand with no tenderness, and led her to the front door. Behind them, one of the servants took the horse and led it away.
Farrell opened the huge double doors with ease and led Ramana through his home. Her eyes grew wide as she surveyed her new surroundings, the place that was now her home too. She was in awe as to how large the place was, how expensive. It was even larger than her old home, despite her father’s wealth and position.
Farrell led Ramana up the stairs and to his bedroom. The room was oversized, like the rest of the rooms in the manor. There was a four-poster bed at the back wall and several bear skins on the floor, but little else. It was a rich environment, but lacking comfort. Beyond the window outside, the stars were growing bright, and the moon was a waning crescent glowing brightly like a lantern in the sky.

Silently Farrell closed the door. He led Ramana towards the centre of the room, holding her by the hand. Slipping the dress down her body, and reaching forward to kiss her, Farrell pushed her gently back onto the bed.

Chapter Five
Amaia

Nine months later

Ramana threw her head back and screamed, grasping the bed sheets and turning her head from side to side. All around her, midwives bustled.

Farrell jerked the reins back sharply, Alastor reared up pawing the air and screaming furiously. Farrell sent the stallion forwards again, swinging his sword at the enemy soldiers below him, all around the fighting continued.
Farrell shook his head, trying to clear his eyes of blood and rain. It was dark now; the only light came from the moon as it cast a pale yellow blanket on the scene of the town below. The scene of death and bloodshed.
Farrell wheeled the stallion around, hearing his name being called, but only as a faint voice on the wind.
It came again. Farrell kicked his heels, driving the stallion onwards, closer towards the voice. And then he saw a soldier riding towards him, fighting through the mass of swarming bodies that surrounded them. Farrell stopped before the soldier, Alastor prancing on the spot and tossing his head.
'What is it?' Farrell called, raising his voice to be heard over the falling rain and the sound of metal on metal as swords clashed, and men died around them. 'What is it soldier?' Farrell shouted.
'Sir' the soldier called back. 'Your wife is in labour.'
Without hesitation Farrell kicked his horse hard. Alastor tore forwards, breaking through the ranks and heading home. He raced across the open landscape as fast as he could, shortly behind him, another figure followed on horseback.
By the time Farrell arrived at his home and burst through the door, the baby had already arrived.
But the first that Farrell saw was not the baby, but his wife lying on the bed, eyes shut and completely motionless.
Panic rose in his heart, and he rushed over towards her.
'It's ok' a midwife said nearby, halting him in his tracks. 'She is well, she's just exhausted.'
Farrell looked towards her, and noticed for the first time, the baby she held in her arms.
'It's a girl' the midwife smiled, lifting the child.
Farrell took the baby tenderly, holding her in his arms.
'She's so tiny' he whispered, gazing down at her.
'Farrell…' came a weak voice. Ramana was stirring now, recognising Farrell's voice.

Farrell hurried over to her, beginning to fuss.
Ramana' he worried. 'Are you alright?'
Ramana smiled wearily, turning her head towards him. The colour from her cheeks had faded, her skin was beaded with sweat and her hair was damp.
'You look pale' he said.
'It's not easy creating new life' the midwife told Farrell. 'The body needs time to recover.' She smiled encouragingly at Farrell. 'Don't worry. She'll be fine.'
The room emptied now, the midwives having done their job and delivered a healthy baby, left happily, and in no time at all, the once bustling room, was silent and still.
Farrell smiled adoringly down at his wife. He reached towards her, brushing her hair back tenderly. Farrell took her by the hand, and together, they stared down at their child.
'My daughter' Farrell spoke, 'my own flesh and blood.'
'My girl' Ramana whispered. 'Our precious treasure.'
'I'm so proud of you.' Farrell smiled widely. 'What should we call her?' he asked Ramana.
Ramana took a deep and thoughtful sigh.
'Amaia' she whispered.
'It's a beautiful name' Farrell said. He gazed down at his daughter, speaking her name, feeling it on his breath.
'Amaia…'
From the doorway a shadowy figure watched. Arlen retreated into the darkness.
He turned and walked away.

Many days later, Farrell and Brice sat side by side on the edge of the town, facing out towards the horizon.
'What's it like to be a father?'
Brice hummed thoughtfully at his brother as he pondered the question. Now a proud father of two, his son Shawn was thirteen and his wife had given birth to a new baby girl, born a few months before Amaia. She had been named Gracie.
'It's hard.'
'Really?' Farrell droned humorously. 'I already knew at least that much.'
'To be honest I've forgotten how hard it was' Brice admitted. 'I don't remember Shawn being anywhere near as difficult as Gracie. I'm dreading her becoming a teenager.'
'What should I do?' Farrell groaned in frustration. 'Ramana hasn't allowed me into my own bedroom for days. She's become somewhat hostile. The other day I swear I saw fire in her eyes.'
'Well I don't know about that' Brice shook his head. 'I wouldn't worry too much.'
'How could I not worry?' Farrell asked. 'She doesn't want me around anymore.'
'Just because she doesn't want you around, doesn't mean she doesn't want *you*.'
'I don't understand.'
'Women need their space' Brice explained, 'especially at a time like this.'
'She's practically thrown me out of my own home' Farrell complained.

‘Be understanding’ Brice said to him. ‘Women are tricky creatures at times. They are very emotional, you have to understand them, and give them space when they demand it. Trust me, I know.’
‘You argue with Alice sometimes?’ Farrell asked him.
Brice scoffed. ‘All the time.’
‘But I thought wives were supposed to obey their husbands.’
Brice threw his head back at this, roaring with laugher.
‘Are you joking?’ he asked, wiping tears from his eyes. ‘Gods no. Woman rule over men. Most of us just don’t know it, because they do it with smiles, compliments and tantrums. We obey because we are either flattered, or because it’s easier to give in than to fight with them. Remember, you can never win an argument with a woman. They have an answer for everything and a quick tongue that will leave you speechless, with no answer to give.’
‘I never realised marriage would be so difficult’ Farrell sighed wearily. ‘I never thought having a family would be so hard.’
‘My dear brother’ Brice chuckled, patting Farrell’s shoulder heartily. ‘It’s only uphill from here.’

It was many more days later, when Ramana allowed the brothers to visit her and her daughter.
Farrell opened the door to see Brice and Arlen standing there. He invited them into his home, and led them through to one of his large and spacious living rooms. Here Ramana was sitting in one of the chairs, holding her daughter in her arms.
She watched as the three brothers entered the room, their footsteps echoed on the smooth marble floors. Ramana lifted her head as Brice and Arlen approached, Farrell pulled back, watching from a short distance away.
Silently, Ramana lifted the baby towards Brice, who took her gently. Brice stared down at the child, holding her tenderly.
‘She looks just like Gracie did’ he said, ‘shortly after she was born.’ He turned to Arlen standing beside him, and held the child out, for Arlen to take.
Arlen hesitated, drawing back slightly.
‘Go on’ Brice encouraged. ‘Take her.’
Arlen stepped forwards, closer to his brother. Farrell watched, as the child was handed from Brice, to Arlen.

Arlen stared down at Amaia, feeling a lump in his throat.
‘She’s beautiful’ he chocked, tears prickling in his eyes and his breath caught in his throat.
He couldn’t believe this moment had come. It felt too good to be true, so wonderful, and so strange.
He lifted his gaze to Ramana, and for an instant, their eyes met.
A moment passed between them.
‘Here’ Arlen whispered as the child became restless. ‘I think she wants to be back with her mother.’
Ramana took the baby, leaning back in her chair.

‘Her name is Amaia’ she said.
‘It’s a beautiful name’ Arlen told her. He opened his mouth to say something else, but hesitated; then he closed his mouth again.
Arlen turned and swiftly left without explanation. Farrell watched him go. His brow furrowed, as he frowned thoughtfully to himself.

Chapter Six
Tree Pirates

Five years later

‘Amaia!’ Ramana called. ‘Amaia where are you?’
‘I'm here mother!’ the girl called back.
Ramana turned, looking to the balcony above her where her daughter stood, hanging off the balustrade.
‘Are you wearing the dress I told you to?’ Ramana called.
‘Yes mother!’
‘Then come down at once, it’s about to begin.’
Amaia ran down the stairs, coming to the entrance hall and standing beside her mother.
‘Amaia!’ came another voice. Amaia hunched her shoulders instantly as her father came marching towards her. ‘How many times do I have to tell you not to run up and down the stairs? You’ll hurt yourself.’
‘Sorry father. I won’t do it again.’
‘Yes you will’ Farrell frowned at her.
Farrell stood beside his wife, who leant towards him with a smile, giving him a quick kiss on the cheek. He smirked teasingly back at her, and placed an arm around his wife’s shoulders, pulling her close. Their daughter went to stand before them, looking forwards.
‘Are we all ready then?’ the painter asked them, standing before his paints and easel.
‘I think so’ Farrell told him. ‘Stand still Amaia. This won’t take too long.’
It was five minutes later that Amaia began to fidget.
‘Amaia’ Farrell told her sternly. ‘I told you to keep still.’
‘But this is *boring’* Amaia complained loudly.
‘Keep still’ Farrell hissed.
‘Amaia’ Ramana cooed kindly to her. ‘Precious treasure. Be a good girl and listen to your father.’
Ten minutes later, Amaia opened her mouth.
‘I'm hungry.’
‘Heaven forbid’ Farrell groaned, placing his hand over his eyes. Beside him Ramana was smirking. ‘How much longer’ he asked the painter.
‘I've just done the outlines’ the painter answered, leaning around the easel to see Farrell. ‘I've still got the colour and the lighting and shading to add yet…it will take a bit longer.’

Amaia made a noise of protest; it wasn't even a word that came out of her mouth, just a long and prolonged moan of anguish that both her parents ignored.
Ramana flattened her dress. The beautiful garment was well fitted and ran across her chest, leaving her shoulders bare, a simple but stunning dress, coloured black and silver. Before her Amaia was dressed in a pretty and modest blue dress, with a large bow at the waist and one in her hair, and beside her, Farrell stood tall and majestic. The dark cloak around his shoulders was lined with blood red fabric on the inside, and at his waist, he carried his sword. One of many he owned that had seen battle.
'Can't I have something to eat?' Amaia complained.
'Be quiet' Farrell snapped.
'Oh look dear' Ramana frowned at her husband. 'Your collar is messy.' She reached around his neck to straighten it; then her hands drew towards Amaia. 'And your bow isn't straight' she said. Then she began to fuss over her daughter's hair.
'Get off me!' Amaia protested. 'Help!'
'Now Amaia be quiet, and keep still, you're making your father angry.'
A short time later, the three of them were settled again, facing the painter who lifted his brush once more to his easel.
A short time later, Amaia broke the silence.
'My feet hurt.'
'Amaia' Farrell warned her sternly.
'Mine too' Ramana added.
'Ramana' Farrell whined. 'Not you as well.'
'Couldn't we take a break?' Ramana asked her husband.
'We've not been here that long' Farrell scoffed.
'Couldn't we at least have a drink father?' Amaia huffed sulkily.
'Yes' Ramana repeated. 'Couldn't we at least have a drink father…I mean husband?'
Farrell gritted his teeth, casting his wife an anguished look.
'Why do you make me suffer like this?' he asked his wife.
'Oh stop being so dramatic' Ramana giggled, patting her husband's hair flat.
'I want to sit down' Amaia complained. 'Can't I sit down?'
'No' Farrell snapped. 'We're not finished yet.'
'We're entitled to a rest aren't we my husband?' Ramana cooed. 'We are not prisoners are we?'
Farrell ran his hands over his face in frustration, sighing and groaning with exasperation.
'We can always come back later' Ramana said. Not intending to come back for the painting at all.
She took her daughter by the hand, leading her away. 'Come Amaia, we'll go outside and look for something fun to do.'
'*Finally'* Amaia complained loudly. 'I was getting so tired standing for so long; my feet were beginning to wear away!'
'Don't be silly' Ramana laughed as they sailed towards the door. 'Goodbye husband' Ramana called back to Farrell, 'we shan't be long.'
Farrell glared furiously at his wife and daughter as they disobediently left his side. He approached the painter, smiling apologetically.

‘How does it look?’ Farrell asked, referring to the painting.
‘Well enough’ the painter replied. ‘I think I can finish the rest without your presence sir. I've most of it done; I can paint the rest from mind.’
‘Very good’ Farrell bowed his head. He reached into his pocket, handing the man a few gold coins before turning and striding away, removing his cloak as he went and handing it to a servant who scurried up to take it.
‘You're not going to look at the painting my lord?’ the servant asked him.
‘I’ll see it when it’s finished’ Farrell replied. ‘What time is it? I must be midday now.’
‘It is indeed’ the servant bowed. ‘Do you wish me to bring you anything?’
‘No’ Farrell sighed. ‘I think I just need to…lie down in a dark room and rest.’
‘Yes my lord.’
Farrell drifted away, coming to one of the large sofas and lying back with a heavy sigh, his forearm resting over his eyes. The servant moved about the room around him, closing the heavy curtains and blocking out all the light.
She left the room quietly, closing the door behind her and leaving Farrell to his peace.
‘Those two’ he mumbled to himself beneath his arm, thinking of his wife and daughter. ‘They will be the death of me.’

Still wearing their beautiful dresses intended for the painting, Ramana and Amaia danced through the town, twirling and throwing their heads back towards the sun.
‘It’s so nice outside’ Amaia said as she skipped beside her mother. ‘It’s not fair that we had to waste the morning standing around doing nothing.’
‘Oh now Amaia’ Ramana scolded. She grabbed her daughter by the shoulder and turned her around. ‘You mustn’t complain about that again in front of your father. There may come a day when he can no longer tolerate either of us. He might just run away from the both of us out of sheer despair, then who will look after us?’
‘We can look after ourselves.’
Ramana frowned furiously at her daughter.
‘Silly girl’ she said pinching Amaia’s cheeks. ‘You're supposed to say that you don’t want your father to leave. Or do you?’
‘I don’t want daddy to leave’ Amaia said as she tried to wriggle out of her mother’s grip.
‘Do you love daddy?’ Ramana asked her.
‘Yes!’ Amaia said bouncing up and down.
‘Well guess what?’
‘What?’
‘Daddy loves you too’ Ramana said, poking the end of her daughter’s nose. ‘And do you know who else loves you?’
‘Who?’
‘I do’ Ramana said grabbing her and squeezing her in a tight hug.
‘Stop!’ Amaia gasped. ‘I can’t breathe.’
Ramana began to tickle her, her long slender fingers dancing over Amaia’s belly and under her arms.
‘Ahhh!’ Amaia squeaked. ‘Stop! Noooo! I can’t take it!’

Ramana suddenly released Amaia, causing her to land unceremounsly in the dirt.
'Mama!' Amaia scowled angrily.
'Well you should have stopped moving' Ramana teased.
Amaia scowled up at her mother in annoyance. But Ramana grabbed her again. This time gently. She hugged her daughter lovingly, kissing her cheek numerous times and telling her how much she loved her.
'I love you so much sweet girl. My precious treasure.'
Suddenly, all of Amaia's annoyance at being teased melted away, and she hugged her mother back; arms wrapped around her neck as her mother knelt before her.
'Now come on my dear' Ramana said letting go of her. 'Let's go to the park and have some fun.'
Ramana held her daughter's hand as they walked through the wide streets, heading to a place built on the edge of the small town. It was a playground, built by Bairn on Ramana's request shortly after Amaia was born. And since it had been built, all the young children of the town came here with their parents to play, including Gracie, Amaia's cousin.
Brice and his family were here today. Gracie was hanging off the climbing frame, her mother Alice was nearby to catch her in case she fell, and on the sidelines, Brice and his son Shawn watched with smiles upon their faces.
Amaia let go of her mother's hand when she spotted Gracie. She ran to her, Alice smiling welcomingly at her as she approached. Gracie moved down the climbing frame, extending a hand for Amaia to take as she invited Amaia to play with her.
Ramana lifted a hand to shield her eyes from the bright sunlight that peered from around the clouds. Alice waved to her, and Ramana waved back. She stayed where she was at the edge of the park, watching from a distance her daughter and Gracie play. In her heart, she felt warmth, pride, and happiness.
'Today' she grinned to herself, 'life is good.'
She noticed movement beside her suddenly, and turned to see Arlen standing there. He shifted awkwardly before her, moving closer.
'Hello' he said.
'Hello' she replied politely. 'How are you?'
The edges of his lips twitched uncertainly as he stood there, maintaining a distance between them.
'She's…grown quite a bit hasn't she?' Arlen said, looking over towards Amaia.
'That she has' Ramana nodded proudly. 'My precious treasure. It feels like only yesterday that she was just a tiny baby in my arms. I feel like sometimes things are moving too fast.'
Arlen's eyes seemed distant as he watched Amaia running and climbing and laughing. She seemed so happy.
'She's as beautiful as her mother' Arlen uttered.
Ramana smirked.
'Just think what she will be like when she grows up.'
'Don't remind me' Ramana laughed. 'She's stroppy enough the way she is now. I'm dreading her teenage years.'
'What were *you* like as a teenager?' Arlen asked her.

‘Well…’ Ramana smiled at the memory. ‘If Amaia is anything like I was when I was a teenager….then gods above help me.’
Arlen stifled a snigger, Ramana turned to him, hands on her hips with a disapproving frown.
‘I'm sorry’ Arlen said hiding his grin. ‘You say silly things sometimes.’
‘I wasn’t trying to be silly’ Ramana told him firmly. ‘I was being serious.’
‘Oh’ Arlen sighed. ‘I see.’
He straightened, facing her. ‘You're happy…’ he asked, ‘…aren’t you?’
‘What do you mean?’
‘I mean…’ Arlen went on awkwardly, ‘in life….now…’
Ramana became sombre.
‘Yes’ she told him. ‘I am. I just wish…you were as happy too.’
‘I am happy’ he told her hastily. ‘To see Amaia enjoying life as she does, to see her growing, healthy and fit and….to see you so happy brings me so much joy.’
She tilted her head at him, regarding him closely.
‘I wish that were true.’
Arlen went silent.
He reached towards her, as if he was about to brush her cheek. But then he drew back suddenly.
‘Seeing you happy is all I want in life’ he said to her, ‘to see it so…brings me so much joy.’
He smiled half-heartedly at her, then turned and walked briskly away.
Ramana watched him go, feeling a sadness stirring inside her.
‘Oh Arlen…’ she sighed. ‘I wonder how different life would be if I had chosen another path.’
‘Mama!’
Ramana looked to her daughter as she came running towards her, skidding to a stop before her and tugging on the skirt of her mother’s dress.
‘I found a beetle!’
‘Well look at that’ Ramana said kneeling before her daughter.
‘I'm going to take it somewhere where it won’t get stepped on’ Amaia told her mother.
‘That’s very good of you’ Ramana told her. ‘We should always help others whenever we can, be they people or animals…or tiny beetle.’ She pinched Amaia’s cheeks happily.
‘I'm going to save animals when I'm older’ Amaia said once she had freed herself from her mother, holding the beetle before her. ‘I'm going to heal them and make them better.’
Ramana leant forward, kissing her daughter upon the forehead.
‘Well hurry up then’ she told Amaia. ‘The beetle needs somewhere safe to go. Find somewhere to put it; we’ll go home whenever you're ready. Don’t forget your father is waiting for us.’

Amaia said goodbye to Gracie and ran to her mother, taking her by the hand. Ramana walked with her daughter through the town, heading slowly back home.
They ascended the gentle slope, drifting down the path towards the large manor.
A butterfly fluttered past them. Amaia’s attention wandered then and she let go of her mother’s hand, chasing after it and jumping in the air to try to catch it.

Ramana smiled and shook her head at her daughter's happy distracted nature. She watched as Amaia climbed under the fence that held Alastor, running further into the field in pursuit of the butterfly.

Ramana heard the door of the manor open before her, and saw Farrell closing the door behind him, grinning at her as he approached.

She smiled back at him, placing a hand upon her hip and flicking her long hair back seductively.

Farrell strode towards her and was upon her in an instant, slipping his hand around her waist and pulling her close to him. He grabbed her roughly by the hair, pulling her head back and kissing her deeply.

A shiver ran down Ramana's spine as Farrell kissed her, she drew a shuddering breath as their lips parted, and he worked his way down her neck.

'You look so beautiful' he whispered to her.

'You look so tasty' she replied.

She grabbed onto his forearms, as Farrell moved his lips across her shoulder, caressing her tenderly now. Ramana purred happily, running her fingers through his hair, the two completely distracted by one another. And then they heard a scream.

Ramana and Farrell broke apart suddenly, turning towards the field where their daughter was screaming in terror and running as if for her life. Alastor had come over from where he had been standing in the corner of the field. Seeing a person in the field with him, he had ambled over towards her intending to simply follow. When Amaia spotted the mighty stallion so close to her, she had panicked and ran. Seeing the little girl run, Alastor had increased his pace to a trot in order to keep up, following the person nearest in sight, as he had been trained to do.

Amaia dared a glance behind and saw the stallion had picked up speed and had nearly reached her, she screamed again in terror, calling for both her parents.

'Help meeee!'

Farrell climbed through the fence, striding into the field as Amaia, followed by Alastor drew closer. Amaia ran past him, and Farrell cast his arms out, fingers splayed he stopped Alastor in his track, pushing the stallion back gently and halting him. He patted the horse's neck gently, whispering kind words into the stallion's ear as Amaia ran under the fence and into her mother's open arms.

She cried hysterically into her mother's shoulder, bawling as if she had just suffered a stroke with death.

'Hush now girl' Ramana cooed. 'There's nothing to worry about, you're safe.'

'The horse was going to kill me' she sobbed.

'No he wasn't' Ramana laughed. 'He's a good horse, look.'

Amaia glanced tentatively around to the terrifying black beast in the field. Farrell approached the both of them, Alastor instinctively followed behind him now.

Amaia began to panic again, screaming and trying desperately to escape over her mother's shoulder, digging her nails into her mother's skin like a terrified cat.

'Amaia' Ramana scolded. 'You're hurting me.'

'I'll take him back down the field' Farrell said, a flicker of a smile ran across his lips. 'I'll let you both escape while you still can.'

Ramana pursed her lips in annoyance at him as she brought Amaia under control. Ramana held her shaking, terrified daughter in her arms as she walked down the path towards the manor.
Ramana put her daughter down as she reached the front doors, which Farrell had opened so easily. She pushed the door inwards, heaving with all her might, but the door that had given way so easily for Farrell, did not move an inch for Ramana.
'Ahhh!' she cried in frustration. 'Stupid door!'
'What's wrong Ramana' Farrell asked, appearing by her shoulder a short time later.
'It won't open' Ramana growled.
She straightened as Farrell walked past her, opening the door with the least of efforts.
Ramana glared at him in annoyance.
'I don't like this door' she huffed. 'We should replace it and get a new one.'
'But this one works just fine' Farrell laughed.
'I can't open it.'
'Well maybe you should try harder' Farrell teased, causing Ramana to glare at him even harder.
Farrell cleared his throat awkwardly, diverting his attention. 'Come on Amaia' he said to his daughter, allowing his wife to calm down.
He took her by the hand, walking with her into the home. Amaia very shortly after let go of his hand and started running around.
'Amaia!' Farrell shouted. 'What have I told you?'
'Leave her be' Ramana said to him, having calmed somewhat. 'She's having fun.'
'But what if she hurts herself?'
'Then she will learn a valuable lesson.'
Farrell sighed wearily, feeling like there was no point to argue.
'Oh' he realised then. 'I forgot to tell you. The painting is finished' Farrell said to her in a hushed voice. 'Would you like to see?'
Ramana's eyes lit up, and she clapped her hands excitedly.
'I would love to!' she cried. 'Hurry' she said pawing at him. 'Show me where it is!'
'Alright' Farrell said laughing as he tried to fend her off. 'Stop clawing at me and I will show you.'
'Amaia' Ramana called turning to her. 'Come over here for a moment.'
Amaia skipped over towards her mother, and Ramana knelt to whisper into her ear.
'The painting is finished' she told her. 'Do you want to see now why you had to stand and wait for so long?'
'I suppose' Amaia said stubbornly.
Ramana gleamed. She took Amaia's hand and followed her husband through the home.
They stopped before the painting now hanging on the wall, standing together and gazing up at it.
'Oh Farrell' Ramana breathed. 'It's beautiful.'
The edges of the painting was dark in shadows, a gentle orange glow was in the centre, lighting up the small family of three in the middle. Farrell stood with his arm around Ramana, the two of them standing close, and between them, stood Amaia. All three of them were smiling. All three of them looked happy.

‘It’s wonderful’ Ramana said, taking Farrell’s hand and beaming at him. ‘Don’t you think its nice Amaia?’
Amaia stared up at the painting sullenly; then looked away.
‘When do we eat?’ the girl asked. ‘I'm hungry.’
Ramana giggled happily, kissing her daughter on the cheek, holding her tightly as she tried to squirm away.
‘My precious treasure…’ Ramana said. ‘I love you so much.’

Several days later

‘Amaia!’ Ramana called. ‘Come down. Your uncles are here!’
Amaia came dashing from out of her room, hanging through the balustrades of the higher floor, seeing her mother waving to her from the entrance hall below.
She sprinted down the stairs, running into the arms of Eidan, then going to Markus and hugging him in turn.
‘Amaia!’ came a barking call.
She flinched.
‘How many times?’ Farrell sighed. ‘Don’t run down the stairs.’
‘Sorry daddy.’
She shrank back as he glowered at her.
‘Oh come now Farrell’ Eidan the older brother said. ‘The girl is alright. Surely she can run if she wants.’
Farrell shook his head, muttering and walking away.
‘Hey Amaia’ Markus said to her. ‘Guess what?’
‘What?’ Amaia piped up happily.
‘I've brought a gift for you’ Markus told her. ‘We both have.’
Behind Amaia, Eidan smiled widely.
‘Look Amaia’ Ramana said, revealing the gifts she had been standing in front of and hiding from view. ‘These are for you.’
One of them was a rocking horse, beautifully carved in dark wood with real horse hair for the mane and tail, with a red leather saddle upon its back. Upon its legs and either side of its neck were carved elaborate swirls and flowers with large golden petals. An expensive piece, and specially made just for her.
The other was a toy made of an unknown material. It was a model of a large winged beast with three heads, a creature made of the parts of several other creatures. Vividly painted in the brightest of colours, the wing edges were painted in gold, and each of the three heads had tiny gleaming gems for eyes.
Amaia squealed in delight, rushing over to them and beginning to fuss. Ramana moved away from her, standing a short distance away, she watched with pride as her daughter began to play. Eidan lifted the model of the beast for her and she began to run around with it, pretending it was flying. Then very shortly after when she had gotten bored of that toy, she ran to the rocking horse, clambering with more effort than was necessary upon its back and snapping the reins as if it were a real horse.

Eidan sat on the ground beside her as she rocked, entertaining her with conversations of horses as she bobbed back and forth on the wooden toy, promising to buy her a real one one day.
'It's so good to see you smile' Ramana said to Markus standing beside him. 'Both of you.'
Markus and Eidan no longer wore their mourning blacks that had become so familiar to them. Now, and since Amaia's birth, they dressed in colour.
Markus reached towards Ramana, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear.
'We have something wonderful to smile about now' he said to her. 'You are happy in life, you have a wonderful home, and Amaia is healthy and growing well.'
Ramana nodded.
'She is' Ramana sighed. 'I am very proud of her. She will grow into a fine young woman.'
'That she will' Markus nodded. 'I am sure of it.'
'I look forward to the day' Ramana said, 'when she will spread her wings and live a life on her own. Have a child of her own, and experience all the joys of being a mother. What bundles of joy children are.'
'Why do you look forward to that?' Markus asked her curiously. 'Is it because she will be out of your hair? Or because you will have another little child to fawn over?'
Ramana slapped her brother on the shoulder playfully. 'Don't you tease me like that!' she scolded.
'We had better be going now' Eidan spoke up as he rose to his feet. 'You know how mother hates it when we're away for too long.'
'He's right' Markus said. 'We should hurry home or else she will worry and become frantic.'
'Give her my regards' Ramana said to them. 'Tell her and father I am well, that we are all well. Tell them I will visit them both soon.'
She hugged her brothers tightly, one after the other. They waved goodbye to Amaia, who was too distracted with her new toys to notice them.
They left with smiles on their faces; closing the heavy door behind them, for Ramana struggled to close the door herself.
When they had gone, Ramana turned to her daughter.
'Amaia' she said.
The young girl glanced curiously up as she continued to rock back and forth on the wooden horse.
'How would you like to come for a walk with me?'
'Yay!'
Amaia instantly fell off the wooden horse, not even bothering to dismount properly. She ran into her mother's arms. Ramana picked her daughter up, opening the window and climbing through it, still with Amaia hanging onto her. Too stubborn to use the door which irritated her so, she would often use the window.
'Can Gracie come with us?' Amaia asked her mother as they went.
'Of course' Ramana giggled, snuggling her. 'Whatever you want. My precious treasure.'

A short time later, Alice answered the knock at the door, seeing Ramana standing there with Amaia.
'Can Gracie come out to play?' Ramana said to her.

Amaia who was clinging to her mother's back like a monkey peered over her shoulder at Alice.
'Of course she can' Alice smiled. 'Gracie! There are visitors for you!'
A short time after that, Ramana was walking through the woods behind the two girls who raced back and forth ahead of her like excited spaniels.
'Catch me if you can!' Amaia squeaked. She darted away as Gracie began to chase her. Despite being nearly a year older, Gracie's shorter legs couldn't keep up.
'You can't catch me' Amaia sang teasingly. 'You can't catch me.'
'Come on Amaia' Ramana said firmly. 'Play nicely.'
She sat and watched as the children played, resting at the foot of a large tree.
She sighed contentedly, leaning back against the bark and closing her eyes. She tilted her head back, glancing up then at the tree above her. Ramana stared at the two large branches that grew outwards above her head, positioned almost perfectly horizontal and running almost perfectly parallel to each other with a gap between them.
An idea slowly dawned on her as she continued to stare.
'Amaia!' she called suddenly. 'Gracie! Come here, we're going home!'
'Awww' Amaia immediately began to whine. 'I haven't finished playing.'
'Neither have I' Ramana retorted with a smile. She opened her arms wide; Amaia as if by instinct ran to her mother and embraced her.
'Come Gracie' Ramana said, offering her hand for the girl to take. 'We're going home, but we will be back.'
Ramana walked home with the two girls, one hanging off her shoulders, the other holding her hand. They helped her, as Ramana rummaged throughout the entire house, looking for materials. They found much wood and rope, and even brought paints. Ramana and the girls managed to haul all that they needed, through the town, and back to the same spot in the forest where that particular tree had caught Ramana's attention. It took several trips and more than a few strange looks from some of the people in the town. Arlen watched from a distance, standing in the same spot he saw the three as they headed in one direction carrying several pieces of wood, then the other direction carrying nothing, then back again in the other direction carrying more wood.
Once Ramana decided they had everything they needed, she tied the skirt of her dress up, tied her hair back, and got to work.
The two young girls ran all around her, helping her as she worked and fetching anything she asked for. Ramana climbed the tree, Amaia and Gracie with much effort, managed to stand up a long piece of wood between them. Ramana reaching down was just able to grab it and lift it up to where she sat balanced in the tree. She laid the plank on its side, resting between the two long and thick sections of branches that ran parallel. She began to nail the piece of wood down.
Once she was done hammering several beams of wood into the thick branches to create a platform, she began to work on a ladder, so that the children (who by that point were running around the base of the tree impatiently) could climb up. Once the ladder was finished, she built a short wooden wall around the platform she had made. Then she made a rope swing, then another, and then hammered more planks of wood into the tree to create another ladder so that they could all climb higher in the tree. And then they began to paint the tree itself.

The day began to grow late.

‘Have you seen Gracie?’ Alice asked Farrell back in the town.
‘No’ Farrell replied. ‘I was about to ask you if you’d seen Amaia.’
Alice giggled. ‘Well this is a funny predicament. I know Gracie is with Amaia playing, but its time for her to come home now.’
‘I am also missing my wife’ Farrell mused. ‘It doesn’t take a genius to figure out that they are all together.’
‘Maybe Arlen knows’ Alice suggested. ‘Guess where he might be?’ she asked Farrell.
Farrell smirked.
‘Praying’ the two of them voiced simultaneously.

‘So have you seen them?’ Farrell asked Arlen when he and Alice had entered the temple and found Arlen.
‘I have’ Arlen replied, rising to his feet and turning away from the idol he had been praying before. ‘It was the strangest thing. The three of them were running back and forth between your home’ he nodded to Farrell, ‘and the woods.’
‘Why?’ Alice asked raising an eyebrow.
‘They were carrying wood’ Arlen shrugged. ‘And rope. And paint. I guess they were building something.’
‘We should go find them’ Alice said to Farrell.
‘I’ll come too’ Arlen said. ‘I'm curious also as to what's going on.’
It took only a short time to track the three fugitives. By that time Ramana, Gracie and Amaia had forged a clear path through the woods, so they were not at all hard to find. When they had been located, all three were amused by what they saw.
Farrell craned his head back as he stood at the base of the tree, eyeing curiously what was now a small fortress above their heads.
‘Ramana!’ he called. ‘Are you up there?’
‘Go away’ came a voice.
Farrell cocked his head, squinting as the light from the setting sun glared in his eyes through the canopy of the trees. Beside him Arlen began to laugh at what he was seeing.
Farrell shielded his eyes.
‘Ramana’ Farrell called again. ‘Come down from there.’
‘No!’ Ramana cried dramatically back, the top of her head just visible from behind the barrier. ‘I said go away!’
‘Yeah!’ Gracie echoed hanging off the edge of the small box that was built above them. ‘Go away.’
‘What are you doing up there!’ Alice asked them with a giggle.
‘We’re pirates’ Amaia called.
‘Pirates live at sea’ Farrell corrected. ‘Not in trees.’
‘Give me all your gold!’ Amaia demanded, waving a pointed stick around.
‘Yeah’ Gracie copied. ‘Give us your gold!’

The three of them were wearing hats made of leaves that were stitched together carefully with a needle and thread. Feathers of various sizes and from various birds were sticking out at all the corners.
'Come down from there' Alice called up to her daughter. 'Diner will be ready soon.'
'I'm not coming down' Gracie called down to her mother defiantly. 'I am going to stay up here forever and float above the forest.'
'But you'll get hungry' Alice cooed. 'Come down won't you?'
The three were eventually persuaded, after a time, to leave their fortress. Gracie was the first to come down, helped by her mother, next was Ramana. She turned, lifting her arms out to Amaia, who still sat in the tree.
'Come down my love' her mother said to her. 'It's ok. I'll catch you.'
Amaia leapt from the tree and into her mother's waiting arms. Ramana hugged her, squeezing her tight and whispering into her ear.
'My precious treasure.' She tickled Amaia, who began to squirm in her arms. 'Let's go home.'
Farrell watched over Ramana and Alice as they left the woods, walking with their children.
He glanced around him suddenly, noticing that Arlen was gone.

Chapter Seven
Make up

Many times the three of them would visit the little fortress built in the tree. There they would play and frolic and have fun.
On one of these days, they heard a sound.
'What was that?'
Amaia let go of the swing, falling lightly on the ground.
'There it goes again' Gracie added, peering over the edge of the box built in the tree.
'Come on' Ramana said to them, climbing down from the tree. 'Let's find out what it is.'
She helped Gracie down, following Amaia as she ran ahead of them through the woods.
'Amaia!' Ramana called after her. 'Amaia slow down!'
They came to the section of woodland where the noise was coming from, and there they saw what was making the sounds. It was a bird. A small green bird with a long downwards curved beak. It was a tiny little thing, flapping around helplessly on the forest floor.
'Poor creature' Ramana murmured at the sight of it. 'It must have fallen out of its nest.'
'I don't like it' Amaia said immediately, holding onto Gracie's arm for reassurance. 'What is it?'
'It's a baby bird' Ramana told them. 'It won't harm you' she said bending down to pick it up. 'Come here and have a look.'
Gracie skipped over to Ramana to see, Amaia hung suspiciously back.
Ramana knelt, holding the bird out in her hands.

‘See?’ she said happily. ‘It’s friendly.’
The little bird sat there on her open palms. Its feathers looked more like fur, and it was a dark moss coloured green, with beady little eyes. Its large wings were folded now, though they were still too small to be able to fly, still underdeveloped.
‘Come here Amaia’ Ramana said encouragingly to her. ‘It won’t hurt you, it’s just lost.’
Amaia approached cautiously, she watched as Gracie petted the bird gently. The little bird just sat there, allowing the girl to stroke it. It seemed happy to have found something to interact with, having now fallen silent.
‘It must have been abandoned’ Ramana said. ‘I don’t see the mother anywhere’ she said glancing around. ‘Poor little thing.’
She gave it to Gracie to hold.
‘We should care for it’ Ramana told them, ‘or else it would surely die out here.’
‘We can’t let it die!’ Amaia cried.
‘Here’ Gracie said to Amaia. ‘You can hold it.’
Amaia took the bird tentatively.
‘We should give it a name’ Ramana suggested. ‘Something nice.’
‘I can’t think of anything right now.’
‘That’s ok’ Ramana patted her daughter’s arm. ‘We’ll think of something.’
‘We can share it’ Amaia said to Gracie. ‘I’ll keep it one day; you can keep it the next.’
‘That’s a wonderful idea’ Ramana beamed at Gracie. ‘We should show your mother. Let’s go.’
They headed back to the town, dropping Gracie off home and showing Alice their find. Alice fawned over the bird eagerly as the little creature pecked at her fingers. Shawn complained that it would make a mess everywhere if they kept it, Brice, though he agreed with Shawn, reluctantly allowed Gracie to share the bird with Amaia, seeing how happy it made her.
‘Come on’ Ramana said excitedly to Amaia. ‘Let’s go home and show your father.’
They said their goodbyes to Alice and her family, and made their way home, taking the bird with them.
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‘What the hell is that?’
‘We found it’ Ramana explained to Farrell, kneeling and cooing over the tiny bird that Amaia held. ‘The poor little thing had fallen out of its nest and been abandoned. It needs a home.’
‘Well don’t bring it in here’ Farrell protested.
‘Why not?’
‘It smells.’
‘But look how cute it is.’
‘It’s not staying here’ Farrell told her flatly.
‘What?!’ Ramana squeaked. Beside her Amaia looked suddenly desperately sad. ‘But why?’
‘Please daddy’ Amaia pleaded. ‘Can’t we keep it?’
‘No.’
‘Please?’ Amaia repeated immediately.
‘No means no’ Farrell told her sternly, quickly becoming irritated.

‘Come now husband’ Ramana spoke kindly. ‘There’s no reason why it can’t stay here, it would make her happy. Won’t you let it stay here?’
Farrell felt his heart sinking as he glanced from Ramana to Amaia. He felt suddenly that if he were to take away this thing that made his daughter so happy, he would be an enemy.
‘Fine’ he said in exasperation, throwing his hands in the air. ‘You can keep it.’
‘Yay!’ Amaia squealed in delight.
She ran up the stairs with the bird, heading to her room.
‘How many times?!’ Farrell called after her. ‘How many times do I have to tell you not to run in the house?’
‘Come on husband’ Ramana teased, moving closer to him. ‘Let her have her fun.’
She kissed him playfully, dancing away from him and swaying her hips seductively.
She paused, glancing back over her shoulder towards him, casting her eyes down and moving away.
Farrell sighed; shaking his head he followed her out of the room.
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That night, Ramana told her daughter a bedtime story. It was a story about a family who had been turned into different animals by a spell. One was an otter, another was an ox, one was a boar and there were many more. The spell that turned them into animals every day and back to humans by night would only be broken when they found true love, or found the one who placed the spell on them in the first place.
‘The bird’ Amaia voiced when the story was over. ‘You said it was called Yayew.’
‘That’s right’ Ramana whispered.
‘I think that would be a nice name for her’ Amaia said.
‘How do you know it’s a her?’ Ramana asked.
‘I've decided I want it to be a her.’ Amaia stroked the bird that sat on her lap. ‘Yayew’ she said. ‘You're a good girl.’
Ramana leant forward, kissing her daughter on the forehead.
‘Well you two had better get some sleep’ Ramana said. ‘It’s late now. You should have been in bed hours ago.’
‘Goodnight mama’ Amaia hugged her mother. ‘See you in the morning.’
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Early the next morning, Amaia was running up and down the corridors. The bird, newly named Yayew, had decided that Amaia was its mother. It followed her as she ran first one way, then the other, hurrying to keep up on its tiny little legs.
‘Amaia stop running in the house!’ Farrell yelled at her.
‘Look husband’ Ramana said to him, coming out of their room. ‘Look how happy she is.’

She laid a gentle hand upon his arm, calming him. She was still dressed in her nightgown, despite the fact that it was nearly mid-day, Ramana watched beside her husband on the balcony as their daughter played. The little bird continued to chase after her.
'Isn't it wonderful?' Ramana beamed.
'What?' Farrell asked.
'Everything' Ramana said turning to him. She extended a hand for her husband to take. 'Dance with me.'
'What?'
'Dance with me' Ramana repeated.
Farrell took his wife's hand, allowing himself to be dragged along, down the stairs and into the entrance hall of their home. Ramana stopped there, facing him. She held Farrell's hand firmly, placing his other hand upon her hip. On the balcony above them Amaia leant against the balustrade, looking down at parents. She picked up the little bird Yayew, running to the top of the stairs were she watched her parents dance, sitting with the bird upon her lap.
They moved across the marble floor of the hall, immersed in their own little world, their attention only on each other. Both were smiling. Both were happy.
Ramana and Farrell danced together.
They slowed to a stop eventually, letting go of each other and just staring at the other, smiles still upon their faces. Farrell then grabbed Ramana roughly, pulling her towards him and kissing her deeply. Ramana pulled back only to come up for air, then to two began to wrestle, Ramana trying to escape but was laughing too hard as Farrell tickled her.
'Stop!' she gasped. 'I can't breathe!'
From atop the stairs Amaia watched her parents happily, thinking about how much they loved each other, thinking about how fun it was to watch them.
Farrell finally relented, giving into Ramana's pleas for mercy to stop ticking her. She collapsed on the ground in a fit of hysterical laugher, holding her aching sides, her long beautiful black hair splayed about on the floor in a tangled mess.
Farrell helped her to her feet, and the two embraced again, calmly this time. They sighed, happy, joyful and content.
Later that day, Ramana and Farrell dropped Amaia and Yayew off at Brice's home, so that she could play with Gracie, and Gracie could have her turn caring for Yayew.
Once they were alone, Ramana and Farrell went off together, walking in the woods alone, hand in hand.
They walked for hours, deep into the forest, just the two of them.
When at last they decided the turn back it took them a long while to return home, by which time the light from the day was beginning to fade.
It was evening and growing darker by the minute.
'What are you working on this time?' Farrell asked his wife in a whisper.
They had entered their now quiet home, where Ramana had wandered into her painting room downstairs.
Ramana drew back the blanket she had used to cover the easel, revealing a beautiful painting upon the canvas.
'It's nearly finished' Ramana said proudly. 'It's my favourite one I've done so far, it's taken so long for me to do.'

Farrell gazed at the painting. It was beautiful indeed. A stunning scene of woodland; with tall grass between the trees and lush green leaves in the branches. There was only a thin sliver between the trees in the centre of the painting where the blue sky could be seen. And in the foreground was a doe, walking across the painting.

'It's wonderful' Farrell told her. 'You're very skilled.'

'Oh?' Ramana teased as she covered up the painting again. 'You think so?'

Farrell took her by the hand, kissing the back of her hand tenderly. His eyes lifted to hers, and he pulled her to him, slowly, holding her body close to his.

'Not a day has passed' Farrell spoke to her softly, 'since the day Amaia was born, that I haven't felt like the luckiest and happiest man on earth. The both of you have given me so much joy….and so much grief.'

'And you are still happy' Ramana asked him, brushing his cheek, 'even though we give you grief?'

'I wouldn't give you away for the world' Farrell murmured. 'Either of you.'

Ramana lifted her beautiful eyes to Farrell's, staring deeply into him.

'I know you speak the truth' she said. 'I feel it in my heart.' She stepped back. 'I would rather we spend one day together, than face the ages of this world apart. I want to be with you, now, and forever. In this life…' she sighed happily, 'and the next.'

'Well' Farrell smirked approaching her. 'I do not believe in an afterlife. I think time is precious, time is short. I believe we spend far too short a time on this earth, too short a life we live, too soon we die.' He moved towards her, his lips hovering over hers as he cupped her face in his hands. 'I believe we should make the most of the things we love.'

'I think' Ramana whispered in sweet breath, 'that you speak the truth.'

She glided away from him quickly, moving out of the room. Farrell followed her, heading towards the corridor where she was waiting for him.

Farrell glanced about the hall around him curiously, noticing suddenly that all the burning candles that had lit up the room had quickly been extinguished. Even those that were far away had been put out; when he was sure they had been burning not a moment ago.

He noticed Ramana then. She was standing a short distance away from him in the centre of the hall, the moonlight from the window nearby lit up one side of her body in a white light.

Her skin glowed. She looked radiant, beautiful, like a goddess herself. She giggled childishly, skipping away from him into the next room. The lights in the next room instantly went out.

'Wait!' Farrell called after her.

The house had fallen quickly silent; there was not a sound to be heard. Farrell listened carefully, noticing more of the candles being blown out as Ramana crept through the manor, teasing him. Before long, the only light that existed, was that given by the moon, pure white against the dark sky above, frozen in the air in its celestial beauty.

Farrell stepped slowly across the hall, moving carefully to avoid bumping into something. He moved into the next room, taking in what little he could see. Dark shapes, and outline of the furniture.

He looked around him; utter silence was all he experienced now. He saw no movement. Farrell spoke, but it felt like he was addressing the very darkness himself.

'Ramana?'

His voice, though he spoke it softly, sounded loud in the still world around him.

‘Where are you?’ he whispered now, as if speaking to himself.
He felt a touch from behind him, arms reaching gently around him, holding him tenderly. Ramana rested her cheek against his back, sighing deeply, content.
Farrell lowered his head, smiling. He lifted his hands to Ramana’s arms that held him, holding her to him.
‘I love you’ she whispered from behind him.
‘I love you too’ Farrell responded.
He heard her sigh happily again.
She let go of him, and he turned, but she was gone.
The next he saw her; she was waiting on the stairs. Noticing that he had spotted her, she skipped away, heading up the stairs towards their bedroom.
He followed her, stepping carefully through the darkness and climbing the stairs.
He reached the open door to their bedroom. Two hands reached out of the shadows and grabbed him, pulling him into the room.
Farrell bent forward and kissed his wife, the two wrapped up in each other’s arms. Farrell felt something strange, like an electrical current running through his body as he touched her. The hairs on his body were standing on end as they caressed one another.
He pushed her back into the room, further and further until the back of her legs touched the end of the bed. She slowly fell back onto the bed, inviting him towards her. Ramana reached her bare foot out to him, running it down Farrell’s chest. Through the closed window, the full moon shone, and Farrell could see his wife lying back on the bed. Her long beautiful black hair thrown back and her arms above her head as she watched Farrell expectantly. The clouds gliding across the sky outside concealed the moon once again. The bedroom fell into shadow, and Ramana’s outline as she lay on the bed, became concealed.
The room became suddenly cold. Farrell heard Ramana shifting on the bed before him, perhaps moving away to give him space to enter. Farrell moved onto the bed, reaching Ramana who had crawled toward the headboard. Bearing over her, Farrell felt a cold draft on the back of his neck, though the window was closed.
He lifted the skirt of her dress up, running his hand up her thigh. Ramana shivered, her breath shuddering.
The room felt cold, felt icy.
Ramana grabbed his shirt roughly, ripping it apart and tearing the buttons away, running her claws down his chest. Farrell did not flinch as her scratches left red marks on him. He ran his fingers through her hair, as her hands ran down his lean and muscular frame and to his belt. She fumbled in the darkness, trying to undo the thing. He helped her, throwing the belt and the trousers away and turning his attention back onto her.
Their bellies touched.
Ramana gasped, throwing her head back onto the pillows as she drew a deep breath. She moaned; reaching out to Farrell and wrapping her arms around his neck, pulling him close into a deep kiss.
Minutes later, Farrell’s pace began to quicken, until he let out a final breath, sighing in pleasure as he felt Ramana below him stiffen.
Their breathing slowed, and Farrell pulled away from her, his skin beaded in sweat. He collapsed beside her, feeling in his chest his beating heart slowly return to its normal rhythm.

Ramana lay on her back beside him, though he couldn't see her clearly, she was smiling to the ceiling.
Ramana lifted a hand slowly to her head, brushing her hair back.
'You've messed up my hair.'
Farrell chuckled to himself.
'So vain' he whispered.
'Am not!' Ramana cried indignantly sitting up.
'Shhhhh' Farrell voiced, pushing her gently back onto the bed. 'Don't be so loud, you'll ruin the peace.'
Ramana flumped back onto the bed.
As they rested, Farrell held her close. Ramana's skin was burning hot; it was as if her body was aflame.
'Are you alright?' Farrell asked her concerned. 'You're boiling hot.'
Ramana took a deep breath, closing her eyes. It may have been a draft, or the fact that they had stilled now, but her skin suddenly seemed to cool.
'I'm amazing' Ramana breathed, holding him close as she opened her eyes again, 'because I have you by my side.'
Farrell smiled, holding her tighter.
'You mean so much to me' he told her.
'You mean more to me' she replied quickly.
Farrell listened to the stillness of the room, feeling the beat of Ramana's heart against his chest as he held her close.
Ramana sat up suddenly, leaning over Farrell. She was smiling.
'What is it?' Farrell laughed.
'I'm just so happy' Ramana answered, speaking through her heart. She was unable to keep the smile from her face as she did so. 'You mean everything to me. I love you more than I can express in words, and I thank the gods everyday for bringing us together.'
Farrell lifted his hand as she spoke, stroking her hair back.
'No matter what happens' Ramana went on, 'I will never stop loving you, no matter how badly we argue. You and Amaia are everything to me. You two are my world. If I lose everything in life, I will be happy as long as I still have my family.'
'What's gotten into you all of a sudden?' Farrell frowned in amusement.
'I just love you so much' Ramana whispered, snuggling into him. 'I'm almost afraid of loving you. If I lost you, my world would crumble. You and Amaia have become so precious to me.'
'As you have to me' Farrell said kissing her forehead. 'I will never leave you or Amaia. Never.'
Ramana sighed happily again. She closed her eyes and dozed for a moment, basking in the love that radiated from her husband, and allowing him to bask in hers.
'Oh' Ramana said suddenly after a time.
'What?' Farrell said, alerted by the way she had suddenly tensed.
'I forgot Amaia is still playing with Gracie. Her mother would have been expecting us to pick her up hours ago….she's probably wondering where we are.'
'You think?' Farrell said rising from the bed. 'I'll go.'

‘Thank you my love’ Ramana gleamed. She touched his hand one last time, grasping tightly, before letting go.
Farrell leant forwards and kissed her swiftly one last time, before getting changed and leaving the room.
‘Don’t be long!’ Ramana sang after him. ‘I'm waiting!’
He ran outside quickly, heading towards Brice’s home.
‘I'm so sorry I'm so late’ he gasped when Brice answered the door. ‘I lost track of time.’
‘No matter’ Brice replied simply. ‘She’s still playing with Gracie and the bird. We let Gracie stay awake for longer’ he explained, ‘they’ve been having a lot of fun.’
‘Good’ Farrell sighed. ‘I was getting worried you’d get fed up with her.’
Brice waved him away. ‘I could never get fed up with family.’ He turned behind him. ‘Amaia! Your father is here!’
Amaia ran through the house at full speed, jumping into her father’s arms. Farrell lifted her up, hugging her tightly.
‘It’s about time you came home now isn’t it?’ Farrell said to her.
‘Awwww.’
‘Thank you for looking after her Brice.’
‘No worries brother. Anything for family.’
‘I’ll see you another time.’
Brice nodded to Farrell, closing the door as Farrell left.
‘Where’s your bird?’ Farrell asked as he walked away, carrying Amaia back home.
‘Gracie is looking after her tonight’ Amaia said. ‘I’ll get her back tomorrow.’
He carried her all the way home. Amaia clutched him around the neck as Farrell walked carefully through the almost pitch black, moving slowly and with caution.
As they reached the home, Amaia tensed in Farrell’s arms, staring mistrustfully into the field where Alastor lived. But he was not in sight at this time, his dark coat blending perfectly with the night.
Farrell entered the manor, carrying Amaia up to her bedroom.
‘I'm not tired’ Amaia whined as he placed her upon the bed. ‘Will you play with me?’
Farrell sighed wearily. ‘Of course. What do you want to play?’
Amaia leapt off the bed, running to one of her many toy boxes and pulling out everything she could see inside.
Farrell sat on the floor with his legs crossed, watching as Amaia brought him all the toys that took her interest, dumping them around him in a circle and sitting before him.
‘I like to play with the toy animals’ Amaia giggled, moving one of the decorative painted horses across the floor and pretending it was galloping.
‘Would you ever want a real horse?’ Farrell asked her.
‘Not one big and scary like Alastor. He’s so scary!’
Farrell chuckled to himself in amusement, reaching forwards and patting her hair.
‘Maybe I will get you one when you're old enough to sit on one properly’ Farrell said.
‘Can I have one now?’ Amaia asked hopefully.
‘No’ Farrell told her sternly. ‘You’re still too young.’
‘I hate it when grownups tell me that!’ Amaia cried indignantly. ‘I can’t wait to grow up!’
‘Now don’t say things like that. You shouldn’t wish your life away.’

‘But I want to be taller and smarter’ Amaia complained. ‘Mama is so clever. I want to be like her.’
‘Well you just have to wait’ Farrell said.
‘I can’t wait to be tall and beautiful like mama’ Amaia went on. ‘She’s so beautiful.’
‘She is’ Farrell smiled warmly.
‘So when can I have my own horse?’
‘I told you’ Farrell said. ‘When you’re old enough to sit on one without falling off.’
‘Ok’ Amaia said becoming quickly distracted. ‘And I don’t want a scary one like Alastor. I want a nice one.’
‘Then a nice one you shall get.’
‘Good’ Amaia said shortly. ‘Just don’t forget about your promise.’
Farrell smiled again. He knew she wouldn’t forget.
‘I know!’ Amaia said loudly as an idea suddenly struck her. ‘Let’s play makeup!’
Farrell suppressed a groan as Amaia ran away again, digging through one of her other toy boxes and running back to him.
‘Are you ready? I’ll put some on you, and then you put some on me. Ok?’
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The next morning, Ramana woke to find herself alone. Rolling over in bed and seeing an empty space beside her, she began to grow a little worried. She threw back the sheets and left the bedroom, heading automatically to her daughters room to check on Amaia.
Here she found Farrell, sitting in a chair beside the bed. He was fast asleep with Amaia sleeping on his lap. On the floor beside them was one of Amaia’s books, fallen to the ground it lay there untidily with its pages bent.
Ramana tip toed over to them, reaching forwards and squeezing Farrell’s shoulder.
Farrell groaned, turning his head towards the disturbance. On sight of him Ramana burst into laughter, cackling as she threw her head back, holding her stomach which began to ache with laughter.
Amaia and Farrell were abruptly woken by the sudden noise.
‘I'm sorry’ Ramana gasped, trying and failing to stifle her giggles in her hands. ‘Have you seen your face?! You look like a clown! AAAAHAHAHAAA!’
Farrell rose, Amaia jumped off her father’s lap as he regarded Ramana with a stoic expression, which made her laugh even harder, until she was on her knees barely able to breathe through her hysteria.
Farrell wiped the pink blusher off his eyes and cheeks indignantly, going over to the bathroom to make sure he had cleaned every bit of makeup off. Only then, did Ramana stop mocking him.
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Later that morning, Amaia went back to sleep, having stayed awake most of the previous night playing and listening to Farrell tell her stories, she was exhausted. Ramana and Farrell were allowed some peace and quiet, as least for the meantime.
Farrell crossed the kitchen, walking past Ramana who sat at the table. He was heading outside to feed Alastor, but stopped suddenly, turning towards his wife.
She sat with her back to him, sipping a strong smelling herbal drink.
'What are you drinking?'
'Oh this?' Ramana said innocently, taking another sip. 'It's nothing.'
Farrell strode up to her, taking the cup and smelling it.
'What is this?' he said in disgust, placing it back down hard on the table. 'Why do you drink this?'
'Because' Ramana answered, her voice growing harsh, but she said no more.
'Have I wounded you?' Farrell asked. 'Is there some reason you wish to do this?'
'You have not wounded me husband. I am very happy with the way things are.'
'Then why do you do this?'
Ramana fell silent for a moment before speaking.
'I do not want any more children at the moment.'
'Why?' Farrell asked.
'Because…' Ramana sighed. 'Amaia has been such a toll on me. I love her dearly, more than life itself, but she's so demanding in attention. How could I have any more children?'
'If she is too much for you then just say so. I am more than happy to spend more time with her if you need some rest.'
'No' Ramana shook her head. 'I like the way things are. I love my daughter, and I want to give her all the time I can.'
'So you never want to have children again?'
I did not say that' Ramana replied. 'It's just…' she turned to him. 'I am happy with the way things are, at least for the meantime.'
'I have always wanted a son' Farrell told her.
'Tough shit.'
Farrell's eyes flashed.
'Listen' he said stepping towards her.
'No you listen!' Ramana said slamming her hands down on the table and rising. 'My word is FINAL!
'It's time you did your duty!' Farrell shouted back.
'My duty? Have I not been a good wife and mother enough already?'
'I need a son' Farrell growled. 'To pass on my name.'
'Because your daughter has clearly been a disappointment.'
'Damit that's *not* what I meant!'
Ramana crossed her arms stubbornly.
'Your brother waited for a long time before having a second child' Ramana argued.
'And his first child was a son' Farrell countered.
'So Amaia *is* a disappointment?'
'STOP MAKING THIS DIFFICULT!'
'You're the one who's making this difficult.'

‘I am the head of this family.’
‘The fuck you are.’
‘It’s time you gave me a son. Amaia is five now. Its time you had another child.’
‘I am not a god dam factory!’ Ramana screeched. ‘And since I am the one bearing children I think it’s my say on how many we have.’
Farrell ground his teeth in anger.
‘And’ Ramana added, ‘you *cannot* say otherwise.’
Farrell drew a deep breath, glaring at her, knowing she had added that deliberately to get under his skin. Deliberately to annoy him and make the point that she could not be controlled. Like a free spirit, like the wind or the rays of the sun, she could not be bound. He knew once she made up her mind, it could not be changed by any will besides her own, and the more he were to fight, the harder she would fight back.
Ramana smirked at him arrogantly, knowing she had won.
‘Dam you woman’ Farrell sighed resigned, balling his fists. ‘You will be the death of me.’
He turned his back on her and strode out of the house to tend to Alastor and the mares. Once the horse was fed and watered, he went to visit his brother, without telling Ramana where he had gone.
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‘I just don’t know what to do with her Brice’ Farrell sighed, sitting on a bench outside his brother’s home. ‘She is like wildfire. I love her like crazy but she annoys me more than I thought was ever possible. Some days….’
‘Some days what?’ Brice glanced sideways towards him.
‘Some days’ Farrell continued, ‘I find it hard not to raise my hand and strike her.’
‘Gods don’t do that.’
‘She says things sometimes to deliberately annoy me. I know she does. *She* knows she does.’
Brice smiled in amusement.
‘Well’ he said clapping his hands on his knees. ‘If you can’t control her, there is only one thing left to do.’
‘And what's that?’ Farrell asked sceptically.
‘If you can’t control her, then you must submit to her.’
‘What?’ Farrell scoffed. ‘Brother. That is not the sort of answer I expected from you.’
‘I’ll see you around’ Brice said, clapping him on the shoulder, rising and walking away.
Farrell watched him go, sighing and shaking his head.
‘Oh Ramana’ he murmured to himself. ‘Why do you pain me so?’
He noticed a figure then trotting towards him, a short figure with long black hair.
‘Amaia’ Farrell said. ‘You're finally awake. What are you doing here?’
‘I wanted to find you.’
‘Your mother let you wander off on your own?’
‘It’s ok’ Amaia reassured her father. ‘I won’t get lost.’
‘It’s not safe for you to wander on your own when you're so young.’
‘It’s ok’ Amaia said again, ‘if mother says so.’

Farrell gritted his teeth
'What do you have there?'
'Daddy. Do you love me?'
'Of course I do' Farrell laughed. 'My precious treasure. Why would you ask me that?'
'Because' Amaia giggled, *'I* love *you*.'
She handed him a large flower she had picked from the garden, a white trumpet shaped flower. She had been hiding it from sight.
'See how pretty it looks on you' she beamed, reaching up and placing it behind his ear. '*You* look pretty now.'
Farrell chuckled, brushing his daughter's hair back.
'Silly girl.'
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From a hidden place a short distance away, Ramana watched. She had allowed her daughter to wander off, allowing her to think that she was on her own. But Ramana was close by, watching over her. She loved her daughter, and wanted her to have freedom. But she also needed to be protecting. She was still so young.
Ramana grinned, seeing Amaia giving her father a flower to put in his hair. She leant against the corner of the house beside her, hugging herself in glee.
She jumped suddenly, hearing a shuffle by her side. Spinning around she saw Arlen standing there.
'I'm sorry' Arlen said, showing his hand in submission and taking a step back. 'I didn't mean to scare you.'
'It's ok' she replied, breathing a sigh of relief. 'You just startled me a bit that's all.'
Arlen approached and stood near her, close by her side. Ramana could feel his eyes on her, but she just kept looking forwards; towards her daughter.
Arlen turned his eyes away from Ramana, towards Amaia.
'She's grown up fast' he said. 'Don't you think?'
'She certainly has' Ramana said, glowing with pride. 'I give her the freedom she needs. But I am never far away, I will always protect her.'
'As will I' Arlen said.
They exchanged a glance.
'I know you will Arlen' Ramana looked away again. 'She is such a good girl. I love her so dearly.'
'I understand how you feel' Arlen replied. 'She is dear to me also.'
Ramana turned to him, eyes wide. She opened her mouth as if she was about to speak. Then changed her mind, and looked away.
'Do you ever wonder' Arlen voiced, opening the subject. 'How things might have been if…if.…'
'If we had been together?' Ramana finished. 'Sometimes.'
'You do?' Arlen said hopefully.

‘Of course. I *was* happy with you. Happier than I had ever been before. I have suffered so much loss and grief in my past…and you…’ she looked to him. ‘You were the light in the heavens, in a world that was nothing but darkness behind walls.’
‘Ramana…’ Arlen breathed.
He stepped towards her, reaching a hand out to touch her, but Ramana drew sharply away.
‘I'm sorry’ Arlen whispered, dropping his hand. ‘It just…..it takes all my will power to stay away from you.
Ramana lifted sorrowful eyes to Arlen, resisting the deep pull in her heart.
‘You’ve given me a wonderful gift Arlen’ Ramana whispered. ‘In making me marry Farrell. In time, I have come to truly love him. And because of him, I have been able to give the best life possible to my daughter. She is my world.’
‘As she is mine’ Arlen spoke. ‘As are you, even though….’ He broke off.
‘I would love to feel your touch again, to feel your heartbeat’ Ramana said. ‘But I dare not. I love my husband. But there is a piece of me that loves you still…and always will. You have been so good to me Arlen. You have made me so happy. But I feel that if I were to touch you, my will might break.’
Arlen smiled sadly.
‘Then we must stay apart.’
He turned and walked away.
‘Wait Arlen’ Ramana whispered furiously after him.
He paused, glancing back.
The two stared at each other for a moment, neither sure of what to say. But suddenly there was movement in the distance, a short squeak of terror. Amaia was running away.
Ramana and Arlen both tense slightly as they looked around towards Amaia. A soldier walking beside a great black stallion was approaching Farrell, who still sat on the bench outside Brice’s home. Amaia had fled at first sight of the horse that reminded her so much of Alastor, the frightening beast.
‘I've got to go’ Ramana whispered to Arlen.
She quickly slunk away, following her daughter from a distance and making sure she was safe.
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Arlen stepped from the shadows of the house he hid beside, just as Brice returned, seeing the soldier walking with his black stallion.
‘Are you a messenger?’ Farrell asked, rising as the man approached.
‘The king has need of you’ the armed soldier growled in a low voice. ‘He requires you and some of your best men to accompany you.’
‘I shall rouse the townsfolk’ Farrell said.
‘No’ the soldier interrupted. ‘The king wants only a few.’
Farrell hesitated. ‘When do we leave?’ he asked.
‘Now.’

‘I just have to tell my wife...’
‘No’ the soldier interrupted. ‘The king insists that you ready your horse and come immediately. I will wait for you here. So who will you take?’
‘I will come’ Brice spoke up stepping forward.
After a moment Arlen spoke. ‘Me too’ he added. ‘I'm coming.’
‘Then hurry’ the old soldier huffed impatiently to all of them. ‘The king does not like to be kept waiting. And find a few more men, but not too many.’
Farrell nodded. He ran quickly to his home to saddle up Alastor. The horse tossed his head excitedly as Farrell mounted him, looking forward to battle and action. He had quickly tried to find Ramana, but she was not at home, and he didn’t have time to find her now.
With regret he kicked Alastor into a gallop, leaping over the fence and tearing down the hill to meet his brothers and the few other soldiers that would be accompanying them. One of them caught his attention.
‘Shawn?’
Shawn, now eighteen smiled back. Had he been a bit younger and not wearing armour and carrying a sword, mounted upon his stallion he might have looked comical. But now, he looked strong.
‘I thought it would be good for him’ Brice explained, sitting upon his own horse beside Shawn.
Farrell shrugged.
‘Is everyone ready?’ the old soldier interrupted impatiently.
‘We are ready’ Farrell replied.
‘Then I will lead the way.’ The soldier mounted his own horse. ‘The king is only a few hours ride away.’
He kicked his horse into a gallop, and quickly the other soldiers followed after him.
Farrell hesitated, glancing around him one last time in case he saw Ramana.
Shaking his head in annoyance at her disappearance he wheeled Alastor around, chasing after the other soldiers, out of the town and onto the open plains.
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‘I called on you because you happened to be nearby’ the king spoke in a grumble.
The king was a well aged and wise man, thickset with a blonde beard and blonde shaggy hair. Upon his breastplate that he always seemed to wear, was the king’s crest, a wolf swallowing a half-moon.
Farrell glanced around him, wondering where the other men were, where the army was.
‘What need do you have of my services’ Farrell asked. ‘Do we ride to battle?’
‘No’ the king shook his head. ‘Not today.’ His gaze sailed over Farrell’s head. ‘I see you’ve brought some men with you’ the king noted.
‘As I was ordered’ Farrell bowed.

There were eight men including himself that had come along, all armoured and ready for a fight. They looked just as confused as Farrell felt, seeing that so few of them had been summoned, and no target in sight.
‘You will not need your horses for this’ the king said. ‘I have an unusual task for you.’
‘Yes your majesty’ Farrell bowed again.
The king led the men through the sparsely growing woods to a piece of the land where the earth had been torn open, walking slowly with Farrell by his side. In the centre of the mound of freshly dug earth, was a great hole.
‘What is this?’
‘I have no easy way to explain this’ the king said. ‘It is more a private matter. But I called upon you because I know I can trust you, and I know you will not ask questions.’
‘Yes your highness.’
‘All you need to know is that there is a great beast down there. It is nothing you would have seen before. I need you to find it, and trap it, so that my men can….’ he fell silent. ‘My men will take it from there’ he finished.
‘I understand.’
‘Don’t use your weapons’ the king told Farrell. ‘It will only attack you if it feels threatened.’
‘Yes your highness’ Farrell bowed, feeling more confused than ever. But he held his tongue.
‘I trust you and your men will get this done quickly?’
‘We will do what we can’ Farrell replied.
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Farrell stood before the hole with his men behind him, glancing off to the side he saw the king, standing a short distance away, flanked by two guards. The king glowered at him, but it was said that he glowered at everyone. Except his wife. They waited there for Farrell to find this strange creature. Some of the kings men had already ventured down into the hole, but the king had told Farrell, that this strange creature, whatever it was, had burrowed many passages, and that it would take many to find it.
‘I've got a bad feeling about this’ Arlen grumbled behind Farrell.
‘It does seem unusual’ Brice agreed from beside him.
‘You’ve never done anything like this before?’ Shawn asked his father.
‘No. We haven’t.’
Shawn shuddered, resting his hand upon the sword at his side. ‘How exciting’ he said.
The other men they had brought with them mumbled to each other and exchanged nervous glances. It was clear they felt uneasy; it was so unlike anything they were used to.
Farrell standing ahead of all of them ignored their quiet discussions. He took a deep breath and ventured forwards, into the tunnel. The light soon was gone from above them, but there was still an unnatural light to be found. He didn’t know what it was, but the walls themselves seemed to glow in places, a strange sickly greenish blue colour. These patches were always high above their heads, closer to the ceiling of the massive tunnel. Squinting, Farrell thought they looked like some kind of slime. It was a thing he had not seen before, as if it was from out of this world.

‘What is this?’ Arlen whispered as he gazed about them in wonder, sticking close to Farrell as they walked.
‘I don’t know’ Farrell whispered back. ‘It’s…strange.’
The small group reached a section of the tunnel were the paths branched out in two different directions. They split up, and continued walking, until the group that Farrell walked with, now halved in size, reached another section where the tunnel branched off again, this time into three.
This continued for a time until Farrell was alone, walking through the dim place feeling utterly lost and out of his depths.
He began to worry that he might not find his way out again, as the path he followed began to twist and turn and plunge ever deeper into the earth. It was when he started to think that he would never find anything, that he saw it.
A colossal beast that filled the entire tunnel before him, it was a monstrous thing, a great mass of pink fleshy skin with two massive arms that pulled it forwards. Its torso was deformed and twisted, and at its head were several smaller flailing arms of different sizes that grew out from a mouth in the centre. The mouth was nothing but a circle of sharp teeth, with no jaw. Behind this and growing in a disorganised mass around the torso were a collection of eyes and smaller mouths and horns.
It was an abomination.
Farrell screamed in terror, automatically drawing his sword without a second thought. The beast had seemed to loom out of nowhere, so tedious had his ventures become, he was becoming used to the same tunnels he walked over and over again. When he did see it, it caught him off guard, in its sudden appearance and its grotesqueness. Instantly the monster lunged at him, its vast mouth a pit of teeth and blackness.
Farrell rolled to the side, out of the path of the hurtling beast. It missed him. It was slow, cumbersome. Farrell backed away, holding his sword in both hands as the thing turned in the tunnel, dragging its great tail around to face him again. It moaned, groaning, sounding as if it was in agony, as if its very existence caused it pain.
An arm, one of the many that surrounded its mouth, shot out towards him. It grabbed his sword, squeezing until its tiny hand bled, then drew sharply back, pulling the sword with it and tossing it away.
Farrell turned and tried to run, but the creature, though it moved slowly was bigger than him, and was able to catch him in a few short moves. Farrell was shoved forwards, falling on his front, the creature bearing over him, slapped one of its hands down upon his arm. Farrell cried out in pain, his voice echoing through the tunnels. He drew a knife out from his belt, stabbing the creature in the arm that held him down. The beast drew sharply back, moaning and cradling its injured limb.
Farrell shuffled back away from the thing, holding his own injured arm to him. There was no way he could outrun it, it could catch him; he knew this.
He gritted his teeth in determination, grasping the knife tightly in his hand.
The beast before him recovered, rounding on him again. It groaned, crouching back as if preparing to lunge for the second time.
Farrell drew his knife to the ready. The creature moved itself forwards, jaw gaping.

There was movement suddenly before him; something grabbed Farrell, shielding him from the beast. Farrell heard the monster groan again in pain, hearing it stumble back.
Farrell looked up, seeing his brother kneeling over him.
'Arlen?' he breathed.
'Are you alright?' Arlen asked him.
Looking over Arlen's shoulder, Farrell saw what it was that had stopped the beast. Brice had attacked the beast with his son Shawn following his lead; they had cut it deep, taking it by surprise. They had come between the beast and Farrell, just as Arlen had run to protect him. Brice was the sword, and Arlen was the shield.
Brice spared a smug grin back towards Farrell, a gesture to tell him that he had him covered. Other men were arriving now, soldiers of the king. They pushed back the creature, waving flaming torches in the air. The thing began to wail pathetically, shaking its body and backing away from the flames in fear.
Brice approached Farrell as the beast moved away. 'Are you alright brother?'
'You would risk your lives for me?' Farrell asked them both in awe.
'Of course' Arlen said. 'You're my brother. I love you.'
Brice coughed uncomfortably beside them, mumbling incoherently something that sounded sarcastic.
'What is that thing?' Shawn asked in wonder, staring up at the creature as it continued to back away down the tunnel, moving further from them as it was pushed back by the fires the king's soldiers held.
'I don't know' Brice replied.
'You've never seen it before?'
Brice shrugged to his son. 'We don't normally do this sort of thing.'
Farrell glanced away from Brice and his son, and back towards Arlen. 'You're still wearing that cloak?' he suddenly noticed. 'The one I gave you years ago?'
'It's a gift from my dear brother' Arlen replied.
'You look like a jester in that bright red' Brice interrupted loudly.
'Very funny.'
Is your arm alright?' Brice asked Farrell, noticing suddenly his injury.
'It's fine. It's only bruised.'
'You're lucky to be alive' Shawn voiced. 'A thing like that could easily kill a man.'
'I've had a lot of training' Farrell replied with a grin, rising to his feet, 'and two strong brothers to protect me.'
Shawn took a deep breath then, wishing in his head to be one day strong like his father, strong like Farrell, and as fearless and loyal as Arlen.
The four turned their eyes then on the thing behind them. It looked small now as it receded into the tunnel. It was no longer the nightmare they had thought it to be not moments ago, but a creature easily frightened, as it continued to back away from the flaming torches that were waved before it, moving away until it was out of sight completely.
'Did you see the size of that bloody thing?' Brice whispered.
'Don't swear' Arlen scowled.
'What is it?' Farrell asked.

‘It is nothing you should concern yourselves with’ came the king’s voice as he approached them.
Walking with him, were three finely dressed men, they were much younger than the king. Farrell recognised them as the king’s sons. He had thirteen children in total. The princes wore their own crests woven into their fine clothes, a wolf depicted running up a steep mountainside.
‘Where did that thing come from?’ Farrell asked the king.
‘Ask no questions and I will tell you no lies’ the king replied. ‘You’ve done a great deed for me in finding it.’
‘You’ve done a great favour in helping my father’ one of the princes spoke; ‘we are indebted to you.’
Farrell looked at him. He was slim faced and handsome like his brothers, with wavy blonde hair and a piercing stare. He looked to be about the same age as Farrell. His name came to Farrell suddenly. It was Tristan.
‘We thank you for your help’ Tristan said. ‘But it’s time for you to go home now.’

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It was dark when Farrell entered his home and walked through the kitchen hours later. He found the room lit by many small candles, and a meal waiting for him on the table.
‘My husband’ Ramana beamed, gliding towards him. ‘I've been waiting.’
‘Where’s Amaia?’
‘I sent her to bed early’ Ramana smiled. ‘Please sit.’
‘How did you know I was coming?’ Farrell asked as she moved across the kitchen.
‘I've been watching through the window for hours’ Ramana told him. ‘I saw you coming from a distance. Are you hungry?’
‘Yes’ Farrell replied, only just realising it. ‘I'm starving.’
‘Then eat.’
Ramana sat by his side, gazing at him lovingly as Farrell lifted his fork to eat.
‘You know I love you dearly’ Ramana told him. ‘I hate it when we argue. I just wanted to make it up to you. I'm sorry.’
‘No. I'm sorry, I shouldn’t have gotten angry.’
‘It’s ok’ Ramana smiled. ‘It doesn’t matter.’ She sighed happily. ‘How was your day? Where did you go, did you do anything exciting?’
Farrell thought.
‘No’ he replied simply at last. ‘Just regular soldier stuff.’
‘I'm so lucky to have a man like you to protect me’ Ramana said.
Farrell smiled up at her.
‘Eat’ she said again, poking him in the stomach. ‘A man who doesn’t eat will fade away. Oh, what happened to your arm?’
‘It’s nothing’ Farrell shrugged it off. ‘It’s just bruised.’

Chapter Eight
Fun with Paint

A few days later

Farrell twirled his sword one more time before swinging at Brice.
'You're showing off again aren't you?' Brice frowned in annoyance blocking the attack.
Farrell smirked at his brother, pushing him back. They continued to fight for several minutes until Brice stepped back, straightening up and wiping his forehead with the back of his hand, breathing deeply.
'Very good' Brice laughed.
'Let's take a rest' Farrell said, nodding towards a tree stump.
They sat side by side; getting their breath back and watching the clouds drift by lazily above them.
'I've been thinking' Brice said.
'About what?'
Brice smiled to himself. 'Maybe I shouldn't have brought Shawn with us the other day. He's been going on none stop about his next…*adventure*…' he shook his head. 'He tells me constantly how he longs for action. Every day he asks me when we will be going out to fight again.'
Farrell chuckled under his breath.
'If he is half as good a soldier as you are' Brice said to Farrell, 'then I will be very happy.'
'I believe he will be ten times the soldier I am.'
'You think too little of yourself' Brice argued.
'As do you' Farrell laughed back.
Brice smirked beside him.
'Do you remember when we were children?' Farrell asked his brother.
'Oh how we used to dream' Brice sighed.
'Are you happy in life?' Farrell asked, his tone turning a little more serious.
Brice smiled widely. 'I couldn't be happier. I have everything I could possibly have wished for. A beautiful family, a decent reputation…and…well…' he shrugged. 'I don't want anything else really.' He glanced back at Farrell. 'What about you?'
'Well' Farrell shrugged. 'I became the soldier I wanted to be, and while I don't yet have the son I wished for, I love my daughter more than anything. Even though she can be as difficult as her mother.'
'How come you haven't had another child yet?' Brice asked him.
'I don't know' Farrell said glumly, slumping his shoulders and resting his chin on his palm. 'Ramana just….doesn't want any more children.'
'Never?'
'I don't know.'
'Maybe she will change her mind.'

‘Maybe.’
‘I know’ Brice said livening up. ‘Why don’t we ask Arlen to join us in our next fight?’
‘Arlen…’ Farrell mumbled. ‘It makes me sad…he’s never seemed to have found a place in life.’ Farrell went quiet. ‘I still feel guilty for taking her away from him’ he whispered to himself in a voice barely audible. ‘I had hoped…’
‘Speak up!’ Brice barked loudly beside him, breaking his train of thought. ‘What did you say?’
‘Nothing’ Farrell shrugged him off. ‘Come on. Let’s go find Arlen.’
They left their practice swords were they were and went to find their brother.
‘So what is it you're praying for this time?’ Brice asked him a short time later, crossing his arms and staring down at Arlen who knelt before the statue Zeana.
Arlen lifted his head to the goddess before him, a depiction of a woman with great curved horns, pointed ears and eyes that were covered by her own long hair tied around her head.
‘I pray’ Arlen spoke, his voice echoing throughout the large hall, ‘that Amaia lives a good long life, and dies happy of old age.’
‘You ask favours from imaginary beings?’ Farrell scoffed. ‘Do you really think your prayers will *actually* be answered?’
‘You just cannot help but mock my faith’ Arlen growled back at him.
‘Sorry brother…’
‘You keep saying that’ Arlen shot back. ‘But if you really meant it then you would stop doing it.’
‘We were wondering’ Brice interrupted, ‘if you would like to practice fighting with us.’
‘No’ Arlen droned. ‘You would only win.’
‘All the more reason to practice with us’ Brice tempted.
‘No’ Arlen droned again. ‘I've better things to do.’
Arlen moved away from them, leaving his brothers shrugging and sighing in exasperation.
‘Alright’ Farrell said. ‘Don’t say we didn’t try to invite you.’
Arlen ignored the both of them, and so Brice and Farrell turned away, leaving him to pray in the temple like he always did.
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It was on one day that Farrell was absent, off dealing with soldier business, that Amaia was given free reign of the house. Running up and down the stairs and the corridors with her cousin Gracie throughout the house, with the little green bird named Yayew chasing them.
‘Oh they have so much fun with that silly bird’ Alice said to Ramana, frowning in amusement as the girls ran by once more. The bird hobbled after them, struggling to keep up, flapping its wings as it hurried on by. It had grown considerably since they had first found it, though it had not flown yet.
‘They do like to play their games’ Ramana smiled as she poured more tea.
‘You know Gracie insists on letting it eat at the table’ Alice said as Ramana pushed another cup of tea towards her. ‘And sleep in her bed.’
‘Amaia is the same’ Ramana laughed. ‘She misses it dearly when it’s not around.’

‘I must ask you a favour if I may’ Alice said suddenly changing the subject. ‘I have some things to sort at home and I need another woman’s opinion. My husband is no help at all.’
‘Of course’ Ramana nodded eagerly. ‘I would be more than happy to help, whatever you need.’
‘Good. Well I must be leaving now’ Alice said finishing off her tea quickly and rising. ‘Come now Gracie, we’re going home.’
Alice took her daughters hand, embracing Ramana at the door before leaving.
‘It was good to see you’ Alice said.
‘I hope you visit again soon’ Ramana replied.
Amaia waved at them as they moved away, standing beside her mother with the bird in her arms. Once they had gone, Ramana struggled to shut the heavy front door, cursing under her breath.
Amaia had wandered off to play with the bird, and Ramana, exhausted from entertaining the two children before Alice had arrived, collapsed on the sofa to rest.
She sighed heavily, resting with a pillow over her face to shield the light from her eyes. She stayed here for a long while, dozing off in the warm patch of sunlight that shone through the window and across her body.
It was just as she was teetering between dreaming and consciousness, that she heard a loud and sudden noise from nearby.
Ramana opened her eyes wide. The shock of such a racket so unexpected caused her heart to race. She sat up, looking in the direction where the noise had come from.
She rose and crossed the hall, entering her painting room; she saw what had caused the din.
Her favourite painting, the scene of woodland with a doe in the foreground, had been knocked off its easel, alongside a stack of paint pots that had been piled up nearby. There was a large puddle of red paint that stained an entire corner of the painting, around which were the footprints of a bird and a small child. These led to the culprits. Amaia stood guiltily at the back of the room, knowing she had done wrong, and holding her bird in her arms. Red paint still dripped from its feet onto her dress.
Ramana let go of the door handle, allowing the door to slowly swing open. She stood there, staring at her daughter in shocked silence.
Amaia was frozen, staring back, waiting for a reaction.
Ramana walked into the room, stepping over the painting and standing before her daughter.
She knelt down, and embraced her, holding Amaia tightly. Amaia sighing with relief that she was not being told off, held her mother back with one arm, still holding the bird with the other.
‘Why don’t you play outside Amaia?’ Ramana suggested kindly.
‘What for?’
Ramana slapped her lightly, running her hand across Amaia’s cheek as her daughter tried to squirm away.
‘Because’ Ramana said, laughing at the paint she had just smeared across her daughter’s face.
‘We don’t want you make a mess of the house do we?’
‘Don’t we?’ Amaia argued, escaping from her grasp and grabbing an entire pot of paint nearby. ‘But it would be more fun inside.’
She threw the entire contents of the pot at her mother, covering her in a layer of sloppy pink.

‘Amaia!’ Ramana screamed in shock. She fell silent quickly however, noticing several more pots unopened beside her.
Amaia noticed this, screaming in false terror and running from the room as her mother reached out for another pot. The bird Amaia had dropped scurried after her, and the two fled from the room, with Ramana hot on their tails.
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Just outside the little town, a group of soldiers were returning home. Their pace slow, Farrell, Arlen and Brice were among them. They began to split, each heading their own separate way home after a long day of travelling and fighting. Even the horses seemed grateful at the familiar sights of the buildings ahead of them.
‘Lords I'm glad to be back’ Arlen huffed.
‘We were only gone for a day’ Brice argued.
‘I know’ Arlen replied. ‘But I'm getting so bored with the same old routine.’
‘And I'm getting bored with your constant whining’ Brice shot.
‘Enough’ Farrell interrupted loudly. ‘Stop it both of you.’
Arlen scowled at them, tapping the heels of his horse and trotting away.
‘Gods what's the matter with him?’ Brice grumbled.
‘Don’t let him get to you’ Farrell told his brother. ‘He will only do it more.’
They walked their horses onwards for a short distance before Brice spoke again.
‘I will see you next time brother’ Brice smiled as he turned his horse down another path.
‘When next we fight maybe’ Farrell nodded back. ‘Or perhaps sooner.’
Farrell made his way back home, and Brice made his way back to his. When Brice entered the kitchen of his home, he was greeted by his wife.
‘Oh’ he said suddenly, as a thought struck him.
‘Is everything alright husband?’ Alice asked.
‘Yes. I just remembered that I lent Farrell my shield. I'd better go and get it.’
‘It can wait until tomorrow surely’ Alice reasoned.
‘I’ll be quick’ Brice said kissing her briskly. ‘I'm sure you’ll be fine until I get back.’
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Farrell walked up the long path to his home, unloading Alastor and releasing him into the field. The horse immediately began to prance around him mares, tossing his head proudly. Foals were scattered throughout the field now, some played together, others stuck close to their mothers, and Alastor the mighty stallion, watched over his heard with pride. Some of the foals were black like their father. They would fetch a very high price when they matured, so valuable that black horses were.
‘How lucky you are’ Farrell said to him, ‘to have so many children and a family to protect.’
Alastor was a good father to his foals, attentive and gentle with his offspring.

Farrell smirked at the stallion, reaching down to the saddle he had unloaded from the horse, he realised suddenly that he still had the shield he had borrowed from Brice. He quickly put it away in the stables with the saddle, deciding he would give it back later. He made his way back to his home.

When he entered the door, what he saw before him made him freeze in shock.

'What the hell…?!'

Paint of rainbow colours had been thrown all over the house, all over the entrance hall, up and down the stairs, the chandeliers, the corridors and all the furniture and walls.

'Ramana!' Farrell cried in fury. 'What have you done?!'

'Heads up!' came a voice from above him.

Farrell jerked his head up suddenly to the balcony above him, just as Ramana emptied the entire contents of a paint pot over his head.

'Dam you woman!' he bellowed, wiping the blue paint from his eyes. 'What is the *matter* with you?'

He was suddenly attacked from the side by a small figure, which he was quickly able to over power. Amaia called for help, Ramana rushed to her aid. Farrell's initial anger dissipated as the three wrestled in a ridiculous pile on the open doorway. The bird, confused at what was going on ran in circles around them, chirping loudly. He too was covered in blue paint.

The commotion slowly died down as one by one the three of them noticed a figure standing at the open doorway, and the bird, noticing the others had fallen silent, had ceased its noise too.

Brice stared wide eyed down at the three of them, all on the floor in a big tangle of limbs with multicolour paints in their hair and on their hands and faces and all their fine clothes.

Brice dumbfounded, was finally able to speak.

'I forgot why I came' he said, before turning on his heel and walking away.

When he had gone, Ramana threw her head back, laughing hysterically.

Chapter Nine
The Beast that Pulled the Cart

The next day Ramana was in her painting room, sitting on a stool with a canvas and easel before her. By her side Amaia sat, on a smaller stool made just for her, with a smaller canvas and easel before her. The mess from the fight the previous day had mostly been cleaned up, and there was very little left to paint with.

Ramana glanced beside her to Amaia's canvas, where there was painting of a flying horse with a rainbow mane and tail, with fluffy white clouds behind it.

'That's very pretty' Ramana told her daughter.

Amaia grinned up at her mother, and Ramana returned to her own canvas, a dramatic painting of a fork of lighting in a red sky, a black city silhouetted in the foreground. Ramana dipped her finger again in the paint. She never used brushes, but always painted with her fingers, she felt freer that way.

‘What's that sound?’ she asked suddenly, tilting her head.
‘I hear it too’ Amaia said, putting her brush down and hoping over to the window, leaning on the sill and gazing outwards. ‘It’s coming from the town. We should go and see what it is.’
When they reached the centre of their small town, they saw a strange sight indeed.
A cart, pulled by the most bizarre creature, and one that Ramana had never seen before, had stopped beside the well. A small crowd of people had gathered to watch and stare at the strange wailing figure, moving around the cart and throwing their hands to the air in despair.
Ramana noticed then that that one of the cart’s wheels was broken, though she did not know what could have broken it here in this town where the roads were smooth. She moved her attention towards the wailing figure, moving around the cart, always hunched over. The figure wore a strange mask beneath the hooded robe.
Amaia peered around her mother’s legs to see the spectacle, deciding she didn’t like what she saw, and retreating back to hide behind Ramana again.
Ramana glanced around her at the people, seeing that none were stepping forward to help, and so she did.
‘No’ Amaia cried in vain, pulling at her mother’s skirt as Ramana stepped forward. But Ramana ignored her.
‘Hello’ Ramana spoke to the figure.
The figure in the deep purple, near-black robe immediately ceased their wailing, turning to Ramana.
‘Oh’ the figure spoke in a female voice. ‘It’s you. What a coincidence.’
She straightened suddenly, destroying Ramana’s initial thoughts of this being an old and fragile person. The figure touched her hand to her plague mask, and removed it. Beneath the long beaked dark mask, was the most beautiful face Ramana had ever seen. Large bright eyes, perfect hair and lips and skin like silk. It was almost…too perfect to look at.
‘I'm sorry’ Ramana said. ‘Do I know you?’
‘Oh’ the woman said, suddenly looking uncertain, as if she had just accidentally slipped a secret she shouldn’t have done. ‘I mean….no. Of course not.’ She smiled a wide smile, with perfect teeth.
The woman stared at Ramana deeply, making her feel a little uncomfortable.
‘What's your name?’ Ramana asked. ‘You're not local are you?’
The perfect woman chuckled under her breath at this. Though Ramana could not think of what was so funny.
‘No’ the perfect woman said, her laughter gradually subsiding. ‘I am not from *around here*. I live far away. If live is what you could call it. I live further away from here than you could possibly imagine.’
‘And…’ Ramana went on. ‘What is your name?’
‘Oh I wouldn’t concern yourself with such things. Not just yet anyway. Just think of me as…the woman who passed through your town. Though I think in time, we might be very good friends indeed.’
Ramana’s eyes drifted to the beast that stood at the head of the small cart.
‘Such a strange creature’ she said. ‘I've never seen anything like it….what is it?’
‘This?’ the woman who was passing through the town said. ‘This is a hippogriff.’
‘I've never heard of one of those before.’

‘No of course you haven’t’ the perfect woman gleamed, hiding her grin behind her hands as if she was enjoying a private joke that Ramana wouldn’t understand.
‘It’s really beautiful’ Ramana said, admiring its white coat that seemed to glow in the sunlight. The edges of its feathers were line in black, and its feet were covered in thick fur.
‘It’s such a shame’ the perfect woman spoke suddenly, ‘for a beauty such as yours to be hidden away like this. You could do great things.’
‘Oh?’ Ramana said, clearly not understanding her. ‘What do you mean?’
‘Tell me’ the perfect woman replied. ‘Have you ever longed for power?’
‘Power?’ Ramana blinked in confusion. ‘I……no.’
‘Well’ the perfect woman smiled. ‘There is much in life that changes.’ She giggled. ‘I was wondering if you could help me’ she said suddenly changing the subject. ‘My cart is broken. Could you help me fix it?’
‘Of course’ Ramana beamed.
As they set to work fixing the cart, Amaia crept out from behind her mother, walking around to stand before the strange hippogriff. It was big, but unlike that horrid creature Alastor, seemed to be calmer. It didn’t try to follow her like that black horse did. It just stood there, ignoring her. But still, she dared not touch it.
It was a long while before Ramana and the stranger were finished, and the cart was finally fixed. But the stranger was still not satisfied.
‘This new wheel looks lovely’ she said unconvinced, ‘but it needs a bit of colour.’
‘I have paints at home’ Ramana offered. ‘We could use them.’
‘What a wonderful idea!’
Ramana hurried home to get the last paints she had. It took a long while to fix the wheel, though it took longer still to paint the already heavily decorated cart to the stranger’s satisfaction. But when it was at last finished, she looked pleased.
‘Oh. Hello Farrell’ the perfect woman said suddenly as he approached from nowhere. He had finished his soldiers duties and had wandered from home to find his wife and daughter. ‘It’s nice to see you in person.’ The perfect woman smiled.
‘Who are you?’ Farrell answered back with immediate suspicion.
‘How do you know his name?’ Ramana asked the perfect woman.
‘You told me’ she quickly replied.
‘No I didn’t.’
‘Oh’ the perfect woman said, though she did not seem to be surprised at this. ‘You must have done. Anyway’ she said turning away. ‘I thank you for your help. I'm sure we will meet again. Maybe tomorrow. Maybe years from now. But we *will* meet again. And I will look forward to it.’
Ramana watched silently as the perfect woman slowly led her hippogriff away, pulling with it the now fixed cart.
‘Goodbye Ramana’ she spoke back. ‘May the gods be with you.’
‘Gods’ Farrell scoffed. ‘What a load of rubbish.’
‘Now husband’ Ramana frowned as the stranger moved further away, replacing on her face the plague mask. ‘You must be respectful of other people beliefs, even if you do not share them.’
‘Why?’

‘Because’ she answered simply. ‘They just *might* be true.’
The two watched the figure walk away, leading the beast that pulled the cart.
‘Strange woman’ Farrell mumbled.
‘She looks like a traveller’ Ramana added. ‘A foreigner. She would seem strange to us.’
‘And what a strange creature she had’ he went on.
‘It certainly was’ Ramana nodded.
Amaia suddenly appeared from her hiding place, running to her mother and hugging her. She felt safer now, once the strange woman and her strange pet were out of sight.
Arlen appeared then, he had been one of the many in the crowd that had watched the hooded woman and her cart.
‘Well’ he said to Farrell. ‘That wasn’t weird’ he said sarcastically.
‘Arlen’ Farrell said. ‘Where were you?’
Arlen and Ramana shared a brief glance, just for a moment, before Ramana went off with her daughter, leaving Farrell with his brother though still remaining in sight.
‘How are you then Arlen?’ Farrell asked him. ‘How are you keeping up?’
‘Well enough’ Arlen shrugged nonchalantly. ‘Yourself?’
And so they spoke together for a short time, catching up on days gone by.
‘I've been so busy lately’ Farrell said. ‘I think perhaps we should have a drink together sometime.’
‘You know I don’t drink’ Arlen told him, waving away the idea.
‘Well I'm certainly not hanging out with you at the temple’ Farrell joked.
Farrell glanced over towards his wife then. He noticed she was grabbing Amaia by her shoulders, shaking her roughly and speaking harshly. He frowned, leaving his brother’s side and mumbling his excuses, he made his way towards them.
‘What's wrong?’ Farrell asked as he approached them.
Ramana released Amaia, turning to face him.
‘Nothing’ Ramana replied sternly, glaring at her daughter who shrank uncertainly under her mother’s gaze. ‘I was just teaching Amaia a very valuable lesson.’
Farrell shrugged this off, and continued. ‘Look Amaia’ he said, kneeling as he produced an item hidden on his person.
Amaia glowed at the sight of it.
‘It’s a little man’ Farrell explained, dancing it through the air to demonstrate. ‘We could make more of them together if you like.’
Amaia snatched it from him greedily, but Farrell did not tell her off for this. Amaia stared wide eyed down at the little toy man made of straw and twig.
‘We could make a whole town’ Amaia said.
‘I've just had a good idea’ Farrell said enthusiastically at her thought. ‘We could make *this* town, with all the people that you know, and the buildings. And we could make little mini fences for the fields.’
‘And we could make your scary horse too’ Amaia said bouncing up and down excitedly. ‘I'm so happy! Could you help me make them? Pleeeeeze!’
‘Of course’ Farrell replied, glowing with pride. ‘My daughter. Our precious treasure.’ He placed a hand upon her head. ‘I am so proud of you’ he said warmly, the edges of his eyes crinkling. ‘You’re a good girl, you know that?’

Amaia giggled at this, bouncing forwards and hugging her father around his neck.
'Mother?' she said looking around, still hanging onto Farrell's neck. Do you want to play with us?'
Ramana watched the pair for a moment, turning away with a smirk. 'Oh you two' she chuckled.
Farrell rose to a stand, Amaia still not letting go hung from around his neck.
Ramana glanced back at them. 'You two run along and have fun, I will stay here.'
'Are you sure you don't want to join us?' Farrell asked looking dejected.
'You two need time alone together sometimes' Ramana explained. 'Who knows when you will be called away again' she spoke to Farrell. 'To your duties. I'm sure you don't want me to cramp your space *all* the time.'
She blew a kiss to both of them, then turned and glided away before Farrell could argue.
She sighed happily as she pranced away, holding her hands to her chest, feeling her heart swell with joy. But something made her pause for a moment as she walked by. Arlen stood near her now, watching her with a strange look in his eyes.
She hesitated for a moment, not realising at first that he had been there.
She smiled warmly to him, and carried on walking.

Chapter Ten
Goodbyes

Many miles away from home, Alastor tossed his head, neighing excitedly and prancing on the spot. Farrell pulled back the reins sharply, turning his horse back to the army that stood ready and armed behind him. He raised his sword, signalling for the men to sound the charge.
The army tore forwards across the plains, Farrell leading the way as his men descended upon the town. His army had sown confusion; their enemy was caught off-guard.
Their forces divided as they wove through the streets of the town, slaying their enemies.
Brice urged his horse onwards, swinging his sword at the men on the ground around him. One of the enemies before him appeared wielding fire. His horse reared, startled by the burning torch the man held. Brice fell from the saddle; he rolled and quickly rose to his feet, lifting his sword high and ready to strike.
He fought in close quarters, slaying easily the poorly trained soldiers. Brice stood tall and proud, fighting with all the grace and speed of one born to be a leader and a true soldier. But he saw something strange then, a figure in the mass of people that fought around him. A person in a mask. A mask with hollow eyes and a pointed beak. A crow mask.
Brice pulled back in confusion, hesitating for a moment. The figure moved towards him swiftly, taking advantage of this.
Brice felt an excruciating pain then, a long knife driven through the centre of his naval, piercing him right the way through.
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The battle had ceased, and Farrell rode around the men as they milled aimlessly about in the aftermath of the fight. He saw surviving prisoners being rounded up and put in chains, the last remnants of the enemy they had fought and defeated, once again victorious. But something was wrong.

'Where is Brice?' Farrell asked Arlen who appeared beside him.

'I don't know' Arlen answered, sitting atop his horse and gazing around.

'Sir!'

Farrell jerked on Alastor's reins, turning his horse towards the voice of the soldier that had spoken.

'We've found your brother….he….he's……'

Farrell's eyes flashed as the man on the ground began to stammer and mumble incoherently. He kicked his heels hard, sending Alastor into a canter, swiftly followed by Arlen on his own horse.

The two of them found Brice soon enough, surrounded by several of his own men. Farrell leapt down from his horse, striding towards the still figure that lay on the ground.

The world suddenly went cold, as Farrell stared down at his brother's lifeless body.

Farrell very slowly knelt down, reaching shaking hands towards Brice; he cupped his face, his tears falling onto his cheek.

But Brice was already stone cold.

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The funeral was held that very same day, within hours of his death. Farrell walked slowly behind Brice as he was carried on the stretcher. After him Arlen followed.

Alice wailed in despair as her son helped carry her forwards. Gracie, just turning old enough to begin to understand death, grasped onto her mother's skirt silently, as she was led by her son.

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Brice's body was lowered into the grave. Shawn held his mother around her shoulders as she bawled into a handkerchief. Farrell threw a handful of petals over his brother's body, before the earth was piled on top of him. Beside him, Arlen was praying.

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Later that day, long after the sun had set, Arlen and Farrell quietly met with Alice in her home.
'I have a lot of money' Farrell said to her in a husky voice. 'I will give you any amount you need to survive.'
'Thank you' Alice sobbed, rubbing her sore red eyes. 'Thank you…'
'I will support you through this' Arlen told Alice. 'No matter what time of the day or night, if you need someone to talk to, I will be there.'
Shawn placed a small tray of food upon the table for the brothers to eat, but like himself and his mother, they had no appetite, and the biscuits grew stale.
'How is Gracie?' Arlen asked. 'Is she well?'
'She is well enough…considering' Shawn said, speaking for her mother who was too grief-stricken to answer properly. 'She is in bed now, though I doubt she's sleeping.'
Farrell rose from his chair and walked out suddenly, without another word.
Arlen turned his head towards Farrell as he left the room, eyes wide and uncertain. He rose quickly; the chair he sat upon fell back, clattering to the floor.
Arlen ran outside after Farrell, calling after him as he strode forwards.
'Farrell wait!'
Farrell halted in his footsteps. The black of the night was closing in around them; the clouds were heavy, blotting out any sign of the stars, and hiding away the light of the moon.
Everything was black, and cold.
Arlen watched his brother, tears in his eyes. He drew a deep breath, staring at Farrell's back as tears ran down his cheeks.
Farrell waited a moment longer, before walking on. He didn't even turn around.
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Back at home, Ramana waited for her husband's return. Still dressed in black, she waited for Farrell to come home.
It was well past midnight, and he had not yet returned. She began to worry.
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Ramana stood by the tall window in the upstairs part of the house, drawing back the curtains slightly and staring out at the heavy black night that stared back at her. Her daughter appeared beside her.
Amaia stood by her mother's side, together staring out into the nothing.

They waited.

Chapter Eleven
Mourning

A year later

'You can't keep doing this to us' Ramana cried desperately.
'Be quiet woman' Farrell groaned, holding his head and swaying on the spot.
Ramana took a deep breath, her heart racing in fury. He had never spoken to her like that before. Never.
'So is this how you're going to spend the rest of your life? Drinking until it kills you?'
'I said be *quiet*!'
Farrell rounded on her, throwing the empty bottle in Ramana's direction. If she hadn't moved to the side, it would have hit her. The glass smashed against the wall behind her, shattering into tiny pieces. Amaia who was peering into the room from around the corner began to cry. She had never seen her parents argue like this before.
Ramana stared back at him in shock and disbelief, amazed that he had done such a thing. Then she heard her daughter crying. She turned her back on her husband, rushing over to Amaia to comfort her.
Ramana left, taking her daughter away from their home until Farrell was sober enough to stand properly. Carrying Amaia in her arms, Ramana marched out of the building, listening to her husband as he shouted after her, shouted at the terrified servants, shouted at his empty bottles.
She didn't close the door after her. She didn't look back, but kept on walking.
It was late by the time Ramana decided to return hours later, walking slowly up to the house, holding Amaia's hand in hers.
The house was still, and there was no sign of Farrell or any of the servants. Ramana quietly put her daughter to bed, whispering to her to be brave and strong, and not to be frightened. Once Amaia was settled, Ramana went to her own bedroom she shared with her husband, only to find him passed out on the bed. It seemed he had continued to drink, even after they had left earlier that day.
Ramana backed out of the room, closing the door after her quietly. She walked slowly through the home and back downstairs, grabbing a blanket draped upon the balustrade as she went. Ramana slept on the sofa that night. The servants who had taken to hiding from Farrell, appeared in the night to clean up the broken glass. One of them placed another blanket upon Ramana's shivering profile. And then they vanished.
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Ramana was woken early the next morning by her daughter. She opened her eyes to see her standing there in her nightdress, hugging the pillow she had brought with her from her bedroom, a habit she did when she was upset. Ramana lifted her body up, propping herself on an elbow.
Amaia sobbed, rubbing tears from her eyes. 'Mama….'
Ramana sat up, pulling her daughter to her in a tight hug and holding her close.

Chapter Twelve
Desire

'I've seen the way he treats you' Arlen said in a hushed voice. 'You deserve better than this.'
Ramana averted her eyes from Arlen, reluctant to answer.
'I know you're not happy with the way things are anymore' Arlen pressed. 'It just….tears at my very *soul'* he said grasping the air with both hands, 'to see you treated so.'
'You should not have come here' Ramana spoke firmly.
'I can't help it' Arlen answered quickly. 'I have had so little joy in my life. You and Amaia are the only things that matter to me.'
'Doesn't Farrell matter to you?' Ramana asked coldly, turning her back to him and glaring at the floor in the kitchen they stood.
'He has changed' Arlen answered sadly. 'I barely know him anymore. I too miss Brice dearly…but….' He shook his head. 'Ramana….'
Ramana felt his arms wrap around her, sliding around her waist.
'Arlen what are you doing?'
'I can't stay away from you' Arlen said moving closer to her, moving his lips close to her neck.
Ramana shivered as she felt his warm breath upon her.
'I can't resist you' Arlen whispered, running his hand up her body and to her neck, lifting her chin up. 'Ramana……I want you….' He jerked his other arm tightly to him suddenly, holding her firmly around the waist.
'Oh Arlen…'
He began to kiss her neck, moving down to her shoulder.
'No Arlen' Ramana said, pulling sharply away from him. 'I can't.'
She turned back to face him, glaring with tears in her eyes.
'I'm sorry' Arlen said miserably, backing away. 'I shouldn't have…'
'I want you' Ramana spoke, her voice breaking, 'more than anything. I just want to be happy…to be loved. But I can't betray my husband. I know he can be good, I have seen it. I will stay loyal and faithful to him, and I will be understanding, like a good wife should be, for I too have suffered much death in my family.'
'But you have never shut down' Arlen retorted. 'You have never given up.'
Ramana pursed her lips, blinking the tears away. 'He loved Brice dearly, I know that.'

‘As did I’ Arlen countered. ‘But I would never…’ he broke off. ‘It just pains me so much to see you suffer like this, and Amaia also….I can’t even tell you…’ He lifted his head. ‘Do you truly love him?’ he asked Ramana. ‘With all your heart and soul?’
Ramana stared hard back at him. ‘I do’ she said firmly.
Arlen hung back for a moment. The two stared at each other, waiting for the other to speak, to do *something*.
At last Arlen sighed.
‘You mean the world to me Ramana. I have never stopped loving you, and I never will……I just thought you should know.’
He turned and strode out, closing the door quickly after him.
When he was gone, Ramana fell to her knees, crying into her hands.

Chapter Thirteen
Neglect

The next day, Farrell had been watching over Amaia as she played, sitting next to Shawn who had been tending to his horse nearby. He had come to sit next to Farrell, to ask him of his wellbeing. And for a short time they spoke, as they watched Amaia playing nearby, running back and forth chasing butterflies and bees.
‘Be careful’ Shawn warned her. ‘The bees sting.’
It was unclear whether or not she was listening, for she made no indication that she had heard, and instead continued running back and forth giggling and squealing in delight.
Shawn watched her closely as she ran past one more time. And then she tripped.
Amaia fell forwards, scraping her knee and elbows.
She sat up, and began to cry. Shawn straightened where he sat, hesitating. He glanced sideways towards Farrell, who made no indication that he had even noticed Amaia had fallen, despite her being right in front of them.
Shawn rose, walking towards her intending to pick her up. But another figure blocked his path. Arlen had appeared from nowhere, kneeling down he lifted Amaia in his arms, glaring at Farrell who continued to stare off into nothing, seemingly unaware of anything happening around him. Arlen then sent a glance towards Shawn, his expression gentler. Shawn took a step back uncertainly.
Arlen turned and walked away, carrying Amaia in his arms, comforting her with kind words as he did so.
He took her home, where Ramana was tidying in the kitchen. He entered through the door without knocking.
‘Who’s there?’ Ramana called as she heard him enter. And then she saw Arlen holding her crying daughter. ‘Is everything alright? What happened?’
‘She just fell’ Arlen told her, placing her upon the counter top. ‘Don’t cry girl’ Arlen said to Amaia tenderly. ‘You’ll be ok.’
‘Where is Farrell?’ Ramana asked as she hastily foraged through one of the cupboards searching for bandages.

‘He’s…’ Arlen hesitated, ‘just outside…somewhere.’
‘Why did *you* bring her in and not him?’ Ramana asked sternly.
‘I just….’ Arlen was reluctant to answer.
‘It’s ok Arlen’ Ramana said, stroking his cheek briefly. ‘I'm not angry at you.’
She leant forward to clean Amaia’s wounds. Her elbows and knees were dotted with blood. Amaia continued to look sad and dejected as her mother cleaned her injures, wincing every so often.
‘Now stop fidgeting’ Ramana scolded. ‘It’s not that bad.’
‘I should go’ Arlen suddenly voiced.
‘Won’t you stay?’ Ramana said quickly, straightening up.
Arlen hesitated for a moment, dancing in his head with the possibility.
‘No’ he said at last. ‘I’d better go.’
He left swiftly, and Ramana returned her attention to Amaia, feeling heavy in her heart but trying to keep a brave face for her daughter. She tied the bandage around Amaia’s elbows and knees.
‘There. All done.’ She forced a smile. ‘How does that feel?’
‘It feels strange’ Amaia said.
‘Well don’t take them off until I tell you to’ Ramana warned. ‘My precious treasure’ she kissed her forehead. ‘Now, let’s go find you something to do to keep you out of trouble.’
As Amaia slid happily off the counter and skipped away, Ramana spared one last glance towards the door where Arlen had left, before following after her daughter.

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Chapter Fourteen
Despair

It was a year later in the middle of autumn, when Bairn passed away.
Ramana began to grieve for her father. She spent many hours locked in her room, never coming out, and even going so far as to refuse her food. Day after day, several times the servants of the house tried to entice her out with delicious smelling meals. But day after day, each time they tried several times a day, they were ignored. If there was a way to perhaps slip food under the door, or into the room another way, they would have done so. But there was nothing the servants could do, and Farrell seemed disinterested each time the servants spoke to him of this. Even Amaia was ignored as she banged on the door, calling for her mother, crying out for her.

One day, after several days of being ignored, Amaia decided to get into the room herself. She climbed through one of the windows in the hall, edging along the ledge outside and into her mother's room.
What she found there shocked her.
Amaia with great effort pushed over the bookcase that blocked the door from the inside. She threw the bedroom door open and ran through the house, as fast as she could and towards the town.
Her muscles burned as she tore forwards, sweating and panting, but still she did not stop.
She found him, drinking at the inn, even now at midday he was swaying where he sat, already heavily drunk. Amaia grabbed his shoulder and turned him around; he surveyed her with bleary confusion, trying to focus his sights on her.
'What'r you doing here?' he slurred.
'Come home now!' Amaia cried. 'You must come home, mother needs you!'
'Not now' Farrell groaned turning away from her.
'Her wrists are bleeding!' Amaia sobbed, grabbing him again, her black hair falling about her face. 'Please! Please help her!'
He pulled his arm out of her grasp, turning his back on her for the second time and picking up his drink again.
Amaia stumbled out of the inn when she realised he would not help her, crying into her hands. Someone grabbed her by the shoulders and she looked quickly up at the figure. It was Arlen.
'Amaia' he said with fear in his voice. 'What's wrong?'
And so she told him.
Before she had even finished, he picked her up in his arms and ran. He was at Ramana's bedroom in an instant.
He leant over Ramana's still profile, touching her cold skin. Her cheeks were pale as snow. Arlen's heart had stopped in his chest. He feared that she was already dead.
He touched her neck, feeling for life. It was faint, but there was a flicker.
'Get a healer!' Arlen called to the servants. 'She's alive!'
He turned to Amaia.
'She's going to be alright' he said to her squeezing her shoulders. 'Trust me.'
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That night, Arlen sat by Ramana's side as she slept in her bed. The bloodied sheets had been changed to fresh ones, and her wounds had been cleaned and bound. Now, she slept heavily, in peace.
Arlen watched her, sitting on the wooden chair he had pulled up beside the bed. Next to him, Amaia had pulled up another chair, positioning it as close as she possibly could to Arlen's. She had worried terribly for her mother, and was deeply distressed by what she had seen. Now she was at peace, like her mother. She had fallen asleep against Arlen, leaning into him. She was utterly exhausted.

Arlen glanced down at her, thinking how she looked so much like her mother, and how she reminded him so much of her. They both had the same beautiful long black hair.
He placed his arm around Amaia, holding her for a moment. How he loved her dearly, she was so precious to him. There was little else in the world that mattered to him more than Amaia, and Ramana. Even though his relationship with them was distant, because they both belonged to Farrell, he felt so close to them, as if they were his own. He had loved Ramana, as she has once loved him intimately. He had seen Amaia when she was very young, had held her in his arms as a baby, and from a distance, watched her grow.
Like his own daughter.
Arlen placed his arm beneath Amaia's legs, and very gently, lifted her up.
He carried her out of the room and down the corridor, taking her to her own bedroom, and laying her down upon the bed. He tucked her in, making sure she would not get cold. He closed the windows, and the curtains. And just before he left the room, he paused, glancing back at her one last time, feeling so much love and care for her.
He closed the door, and returned to Ramana's room, where he spent the rest of that night by her side.
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A few hours later, Ramana woke with the morning light. Sitting up she saw Arlen on the wooden chair beside her bed, having himself drifted off to sleep, he sat slumped with his head to the side.
She reached forward, whispering his name as she shook him gently.
Arlen jolted awake, blinking for a moment in confusion. He smiled when he saw her, reaching forwards he stroked her cheek, leaning towards her and resting his forehead against hers.
'I'm so glad you're ok….' he whispered.
It was later that morning when they heard Farrell stumble home, barging in through the front door and groaning loudly as he slouched into one of the other rooms of the house.
'I need some fresh air. I think I'm going to go for a walk' Ramana said to Arlen, as she brushed her hair before the tall mirror in her bedroom. She ignored the return of her husband and the sounds coming from downstairs as he fell into things, calling out for her loudly.
'Are you sure you're strong enough?' Arlen asked her with worry.
'I'll be fine' Ramana answered.
'Do you want me to come with you?'
'No' Ramana said. 'I think I want to be alone with my daughter.'
Amaia smiled up at her from beside, and Ramana returned the gesture.
Before she left the room, Ramana paused beside Arlen, staring deep into his eyes. Arlen felt the bandages that had been tied around her wrists brush against his skin as she moved to hold him in a gentle embrace.
'Thank you' she whispered to him. 'Thank you for everything.'
She left the room with her daughter's hand in her own. Arlen watched her go.

Ramana descended the stairs, heading to the front door Farrell had left open. She glanced back into the house where Farrell was swearing and shouting at one of the servants.
She pulled her daughter close to her, and marched outside.

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Chapter Fifteen
Murder

A few days later, once Ramana's wound had healed enough for her not to need bandages, she was walking again with her daughter in the woods. It was now becoming a habit for Ramana to avoid her own home, in order to avoid her husband. It was something Amaia had wanted too.
And so they left together, mother and daughter. Avoiding the town altogether, they hid themselves in the trees. On this day, they walked along the road leading out of the town, which was surrounded on either side by woodlands. This was the main road out of the town, it was nothing but a dirt track, and today, like most other days, was deserted.
Ramana released her daughter's hand and Amaia immediately ran forwards and began to play, trying to jump up and catch the falling leaves from the trees all around.
It was autumn, and the air around them was cool. Their footsteps on the forest floor made crunching sounds as they walked the carpet of dead leaves.
Ramana walked with her daughter a short while, before sitting slumped upon the fallen trunk of a tree, watching her daughter absent mindedly as she ran around.
She sighed wearily, resting with her chin on her hands. For some time Amaia played, completely distracted with her own games.
'Hey look! Mother look!'
Ramana lifted her head, straightening up to see her daughter lying on the ground on her belly with her arms and legs sprawled out awkwardly.
'Look!' she gleamed, crawling forwards clumsily. 'I'm a beetle!'
Ramana chuckled to herself, cheering up a little. She rose from the trunk and glided over to her daughter, kneeling behind her and picking her up. She nuzzled into her neck, tickling her. Amaia squealed in delight, wriggling in her mother's arms.
'I love you so much' Ramana said to her. 'You mean everything to me.' She kissed her one last time. 'My precious treasure.'
'You mean more to me' Amaia giggled. 'I love you like a swallow loves honey.'
'What?' Ramana chuckled. 'Swallows don't eat honey.'
'How do you know?' Amaia asked her. 'Have you ever followed one around?'
'No' Ramana smiled to her daughter. 'Of course I haven't. I can't fly.'
Ramana let go of her daughter, drifting away and leaving Amaia to her games of being a beetle, her mind beginning to drift again.
'Mother?' Amaia spoke up a moment later.

Ramana turned to her daughter who lay on the ground with her head turned to the side, her ear pressed against the earth.
'Do you hear that noise?' Amaia asked. Her voice was uncertain.
'What is it?' Ramana said.
'Rumbling.'
Ramana lifted her head, stiffening at the sound of falling hooves. The thundering of the horses steps signalled the swift arrival of many.
'Amaia' her mother hastened, 'come quickly.'
Amaia picked herself off the ground, running to her mother's side. Ramana marched quickly back down the road and towards the town, walking with her arm around her daughter's shoulders and head down. Behind them the horses approached. Ramana pulled her daughter tightly to her as the horses descended upon them, hoping that they would simply pass them by. But the great beasts walled them in, trapping them from either side, turning around and blocking their path at the front, as more horses closed the net behind them.

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Walking alone in the woods, the band of about ten men was seen travelling at high speed down the dirt road heading away from the town. Arlen raised his head curiously as the horses tore through the countryside. He was some distance away, so wasn't able to see them clearly. The sun was in the sky before him, he blinked several times as the branches of the trees waved up and down in the breeze, flashing the sunlight in his eyes. Arlen squinted, seeing the figures only as blurred silhouettes. When they were out of view, he jogged forwards, out of the trees and coming to stand on the road they had ridden over, listening to the sounds of the falling hooves growing ever fainter.
A strange feeling of trepidation seeped into him, chilling his skin. Something felt very wrong to him, and Arlen wondered who the men were and what they were doing near his town home. A small and unremarkable place on the corner of the map; a place of little consequence where little ever happened. But more than anything else, the thing that concerned him the most, was why the men were in such a hurry. What had happened for there to be need of such haste?
He turned the other way, glancing to the direction the men had come from, and began to walk.
He walked and walked, every step caused there to be an ever growing feeling of dread within his heart. He didn't know why, but some unknown sense, some instinct within him, told him that something was very very wrong.
When he lifted his head a short time later, his heart jolted and he froze in mid-step.
He saw something before him, further along the road. Though he couldn't see it clearly from where he stood, a feeling of terror struck him like a bolt of lightning.

Arlen broke into a run, heading towards this thing he could not make clear of what it was. As he drew closer, he slowed to a stop, standing over the figure on the ground.
His whole world crashed around him. Tears ran from his eyes and he became so weak and sick, he could no longer hold himself to stand. Knees feeling as if they had suddenly turned to water, he collapsed, a darkness descending over his eyes. He struggled to remain consciousness, struggled not to black out.
He screwed his eyes tight shut, opening them again and daring to look at the dead body of Ramana. The dead body, of the woman he loved.
His body began to shake as he leant forward to embrace her, wracked with sobs he lifted her and held her in his arms, crying and rocking back and forth in despair. Her body was utterly lifeless, her head lolled, and her arms dropped to her side. Arlen drew back, staring into her face. She was beautiful, so so beautiful, and young. Far too young to die.
The blood still ran fresh from the wound in her chest, a wound that looked like it had reached her heart.

A thought touched his mind then, a thought that frightened him even more than what he saw before him.
Arlen glanced about him feverishly, desperately crying out to the silent forest around.
'AMAIAAAA!'
Nothing.
He rested Ramana's body back on the earth, rising to his feet and turning on the spot, eyes darting all around him.
'AMAIA WHERE ARE YOU????!!!'
He hesitated, thinking of the men that had ridden past him, and thinking it was they who must have done this. He spared one last horrified glance back at Ramana, her body so still, before turning and fleeing back towards the town.

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Arlen burst through the door to his brother's manor.
'FARRELL!' he cried to the empty hall. 'FARRELL!'
Seconds later the grim figure of his brother appeared on the balcony above him, roused by the call and hastened by the panic in Arlen's voice.
'What is it Arlen?' he demanded.
'Ramana is dead!' Arlen blurted.
Farrell went still, as the words slowly sunk in.
'Amaia is missing' Arlen went on. 'She's been taken!'
Arlen watched his brother stumble, grabbing onto the railings to support himself. Farrell held his head as if his mind hurt, as if he were struggling to think clearly.

‘We have to go now!’ Arlen urged. ‘We have to look for her. I saw soldiers riding off at high speed; they must have something to do with this!’
Arlen watched as Farrell forced himself to straighten, moving towards the stairs and heading down, marching with a single purpose, across the hall and through the open door.
Outside he broke into a run, swiftly followed by Arlen. They headed to the field before the manor where Farrell’s remaining horse Alastor grazed. Farrell leapt upon the beast with no saddle or bridle, Arlen unprompted quickly followed suit, sitting behind Farrell and holding onto him. The horse jerked its head back startled as heels were dug into its flank. Alastor leapt over the fence and cantered back through the town where Arlen had come, and towards the bell in the centre where the soldiers assembled, the bell when rung would rouse the soldiers.
Within minutes soldiers appeared; confused and uncertain, among them were two figures that stood out from the rest. The brothers Eidan and Markus.
‘What has happened?’ the eldest Eidan demanded, coming to stand beside Farrell’s horse.
‘It’s Ramana’ Arlen choked, but he could say no more.
‘Lead the way’ Markus hastened with urgency in his voice. ‘And hurry!’
Guided by Arlen’s direction, Farrell led the men out of the town, and to the section of woodland where Ramana’s body rested.
He pulled his horse back when he found her, jerking on the mane, he stared in utter disbelieve at the dead body of his wife, lying on the leaf-strewn earth. Already the forest was trying to bury her; the autumn leaves from the trees falling from above had covered parts of her body.
Cries of defiance and grief were heard from behind as Eidan and Markus leapt from their horses, rushing over to her and throwing themselves on the ground around her.
‘I saw men riding ahead’ Arlen told Farrell in a distant voice, unable to tear his eyes away from the scene of the brother’s grief. ‘They travelled quickly…’
Arlen was able to slide off the horse, just before Farrell sent Alastor racing onwards, followed by the other mounted soldiers in search of the culprit.
Arlen watched as the brothers grieved over the body of their beloved sister, whom for them had been the treasure of their lives. It was heartbreaking to watch.
They wept, holding her and pawing at her body, throwing their heads back and wailing in pain and despair that their loss.
Arlen felt a clench in his heart. A black fog fell around him and he covered his face, moving away from the brothers, unable to take anymore.
He stumbled then, glancing down to see what had tripped him. Arlen knelt, brushed back the leaves that covered the forest floor, and had continued to fall all around.
In the road, running all the way across, was great crack, inches thick. Arlen narrowed his eyes, blinking several times to clear the tears. He stared down at the fracture in the road.
‘What is this?’ he whispered.

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Further down the road, Farrell and his men had ridden. They had passed a single dead man, who appeared to have no injury on him at all. It was a mystery how he died. But further along the road, was a mystery far deeper.
Farrell pulled his horse back, surveying the scene around him.
'What in god's name….'
The bodies of twelve soldiers lay scattered in their path, soldiers who were armed and armoured. They all bore the crest of the king, a wolf swallowing a half-moon.
It looked as if they had been ambushed.
Farrell ordered the soldiers that followed him, to check the men to see if any were alive.
But they were all dead. And Amaia could not be found.

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Chapter Sixteen
Parting Words

Ramana was buried where she had fallen. A great mound of earth was used to cover her, and as if the forest was morning her loss also, the trees once again with their falling leaves, created a blanket over her grave.
The people of the town gathered to this once unremarkable spot in the woods and mourned, as the realisation of the terrible thing that had happened slowly dawned on each of them. And they began to wonder, how such a terrible thing could happen, and who would want to hurt Ramana.
But none could know. The only people who could be found responsible were dead. And there were no leads as to who was responsible. The tracks that led away from the dead men had vanished in a river some miles away.
Now, the people gathered around the mound, and listened, as the holy man spoke a prayer over Ramana's resting body.
'She would have wanted to be buried here' a voice whispered.
Farrell glanced towards the speaker; it was Alice, his brother's widow. This was the second funeral she and her children had experienced.
Too young for them Farrell thought for Shawn and Gracie. *Too young…*
Before Alice and Shawn, Gracie stood, staring blankly at the mound around which the townsfolk had gathered. In her arms she held her precious bird Yayew, once shared with Amaia, now it was only hers.
The brothers Eidan and Markus stood at the front of the crowd, dressed in their old mourning colours of black once more. They stood like dark columns, side by side watching over their sister's grave. It was a tragic day for Eidan and Markus especially. After losing so many of their brothers in the past, then losing their father and now their sister, they were all alone now….they had no one anymore, only each other.
At least, Farrell thought bitterly, Bairn was not here to witness this terrible day.

A cry from Gracie caught the attention of many of the people around her. Her pet bird was flapping wildly in her arms and squawking, trying to free itself from her hold. It jumped to the ground, spreading its wings, and then took flight, much to everyone's surprise. Gracie called to the bird, but the bird rising higher in the sky, did not return.

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Farrell glanced up from the mound as the holy man continued to speak, catching the glare of his brother.
Unlike the others, Arlen did not have his sights towards the mound, but instead, they were fixed on him.

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Farrell left once it was all over, returning to his lonely home. Not knowing truly what had happened on this day, nor why. Why his beloved wife and child had been taken from him so callously.
He was gripped by a sudden sense of unreality, suddenly seeing the world in a different light. Since Brice's death, things had changed. Now, the world was grey.
It was dark now. Farrell stumbled through the kitchen and into the dining room. He grabbed onto the dressing table for support, head hung as he experienced such deep and unpleasant emotions, he couldn't put a label to them. He thought for a moment, that the pain and misery he was feeling must surely be worse than death itself.
It was dark now, and the house was quiet, the servants were asleep at home or elsewhere. Farrell thought he was alone, but he not.
He heard movement close by, and glanced up to see a shadowy figure. He had been so caught up in his thoughts; he had not heard anyone approaching.
As the figure stepped forward he saw that it was Arlen, an expression of raw fury on his face.
'*You.'*
He grabbed Farrell by the shoulders and slammed him against the wall, Farrell felt the cold sharp touch of steel at his throat, and he instinctively drew back away from the blade his brother held to him.
'YOU WERE SUPPOSED TO PROTECT HER!' Arlen screamed. 'SHE IS *DEAD* NOW BECAUSE OF YOU!'

He grabbed Farrell by the hair, slamming his head back hard against the wall, and lifting the blade higher against his throat, pushing harder. Farrell felt the slice of metal and the hot trickle of blood. But he did not resist. He almost whished his brother would kill him.
But Arlen could not bring himself to do it.
He drew back, letting the knife slip from his fingers, as he backed away, sobbing and gasping.
'You were supposed to protect her….' he whispered. 'You were supposed to protect her….'
And then he was consumed with another wave of anger. His brow knitted together and his gums showed in a snarl. He looked at his brother, in a way he never had before in his life.
With loathing.
'I HATE YOU! I HATE YOU!' he cried turning on the spot and marching away. 'I NEVER WANT TO SEE YOU *AGAIN*!' He unclasped the cloak from around his neck as he stormed off. The cloak Farrell had given him as a gift years ago. He had worn it all this time, so much had it meant to him. A gift from his brother.
Arlen paused at the door, speaking one last time.
'Never try to look for me. Never try to find me. If I ever see you again, I *will* kill you.'
He slammed the door, and Farrell was left, completely alone.

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The next morning, Farrell had learnt that Arlen had left the town altogether.
He was not seen again.

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Chapter Seventeen
Deep Sleep

Twenty years ago

Her laughter was like the tinkling of falling rain. She swung the sword she carried, a long and delicate blade. She danced with it, the skirt of her long dress swirling around her long legs. Poising her body and standing in perfect form with the sword held high.
'I have never known a woman like you' came another voice.
The woman smiled. She flicked back her short hair, lowered her sword and turned to face the man behind her.
'Husband' she beamed, hiding the sword shyly behind her back.
The man smiled at her. He bowed.

‘My queen.’
Mearah skipped forwards. She twirled once with her arms swung out, dancing with her long sword and sheathing it before she reached him. The queen bowed to her husband, as he had done for her. He lifted her chin, and she straightened up again, facing him.
‘You are so beautiful’ the king said to her.
‘You always say that.’
‘That’s because it’s always true.’
Mearah giggled.
‘You are too good to me husband.’
‘Such a wonderful woman deserves to be treated like an angel.’
Mearah giggled again.
‘Sometimes I think you are a gift from the heavens themselves’ he said. ‘Never in all my life have I seen such beauty, such radiance. Never in all my life have I had the honour of being allowed to witness such magnificence.’
‘Oh husband’ Mearah said turning from him. ‘I don’t know how to repay such kindness.’
The king reached out for her, touching her gently by the arm and turning her back around. Mearah gazed at him, cheeks blushing.
‘You are the kindest person I have ever known’ the king said to her. ‘Even in the darkest places….you see only good.’
The queen smiled warmly at her husband.
‘I love you dear husband, I want us to spend the rest of our lives together, the rest of eternity….’
But then something happened, something that had never happened before.
Mearah stumbled. The sword fell from her grip, and her hand went to her forehead as she hunched forwards.
Then she straightened up, staring back at her husband the king with utter shock.
Her eyes rolled back in her head, and she collapsed.
The king caught her as she fell, calling desperately for help. Servants began to flock to the courtyard, calling to others still inside the building, who called to others further away, all calling for help from someone else. Anyone else. All the while, the king knelt beside his wife, holding her close to him, hands trembling in terror of what had happened to her, trying in vain to shake her awake.
But the queen lay utterly still, though her heart continued beating.
She did not wake.

Part 2

Twelve years later

Chapter Eighteen
The Dream

This day was a rare day. It was a religious holiday that celebrated the first rays of sunlight that shone in the sky after an eighty-year long winter. The holy stories tell of the god Ezla, imprisoning the goddess Micro for eighty years beneath the rocky earth in a great cavern. He did this because he was madly in love with her, and wanted her for himself. Without the warmth in the world that Micro created, everything grew cold. When at last she was freed eighty years later, a great party was held to celebrate her return. And this was the holiday many people rejoiced in.

But not Farrell.

It was a precious celebration for many, and one that most would see only once in their lifetime. But Farrell cared little for such things nowadays. There was once a time he would have rejoiced in such an occasion, alongside everyone else. There was once a time where he would may have spent a day like today celebrating and laughing with his family.

But things had changed.

He stayed at home that evening, alone as he slept. The sky outside was lit up with fireworks, but Farrell cared not for them. He did not see the bright flashes of light, nor hear their bangs.

Now Farrell slept deeply, and he dreamed.

He was walking through woodland, a forest he recognised. It was the one near his home, the one he had once spent so much time wandering with Ramana, when she was alive.

Everything was still. The low sun shone through the columns of the trees, casting long shadows upon the forest floor.

Everything was quiet, apart from his own footsteps as Farrell walked forwards. There was not a bird to be heard, nor the sound of wind, nor the sound of any flowing water, despite there being a stream nearby.

He saw a figure in the woods, standing with her back to him; a mature female figure, with long cascading black hair that reached to the bottom of her back.

Farrell approached her, reaching a hand out to touch her shoulder.

'Ramana.'

He turned her around to see her face; then let out a slight gasp of surprise, stepping back.

It wasn't Ramana, but someone who looked very similar, with a younger face. It was perhaps……what his daughter might have looked like.

The figure spoke directly to him.

'I am still alive' she breathed. 'Find me….'

Farrell opened his eyes.

He threw the sheets back, swinging his legs over the edge of the bed. He leant with his elbows on his knees, face in his hands as he rubbed his eyes wearily. Then he paused as his mind began to wake, the memories slowly coming back to him.
That dream….
He lowered his hands slowly, and he straightened up.
That young woman….it looked so much like what his daughter might have looked like…. if she was still alive….

'Find me….'

His stomach began to slowly tighten as exciting thoughts crept into his mind.
Was that dream real? Was it perhaps a premonition?
'What if she's still alive?' Farrell mumbled to himself.
What is this that I'm feeling? Farrell thought. *I've never felt this way before.*
And then he suddenly realised something, something he had forgotten, that had stayed beneath the surface of his conscious thought for twelve years, something from that terrible day when he lost both his beloved wife and child.
Ramana's body had been buried. But Amaia's had never been found.

Farrell sat there on his bed. Thinking.
What if she is still alive? Could it be true? After all this time?

He rose from his bed; wild thoughts of possibility were running through his mind, so fresh and exciting when he first woke, now they began to fade as he dressed.
By the time he went downstairs to prepare his breakfast, they were gone altogether.
The rest of that day was perfectly normal.

That night, Farrell dreamed again, and it was the same dream as the one he had had the night before.
It was a dream of her. And again. She said the same thing.

'I am still alive. Find me….'

Farrell woke that morning, not with the same feeling of excitement as he had experienced the morning before, but a strange feeling he couldn't describe, a foreign and uneasy feeling. But once again, as he had the morning before, his strange feelings ebbed away, and by the time he finished his breakfast, they were gone altogether.
After that he left his house, looking for something to occupy him.

That night he dreamed again. And the night after that. And the one after that.

'Find me….'
'Find me….'
'Find me….'

Chapter Nineteen
No turning back

'I don't know what's wrong with me. These dreams…. it's like they're beginning to haunt me.'
Farrell sat in the kitchen of his grand home. The woman he was talking to, was a newly acquired love, they had been together for only a few short months. It was a strange relationship. She was a young traveller of some kind, but she refused to speak of her life or her past to him, Farrell barely even knew who she was, even now.
'Maybe it's a sign' Nevina replied, taking a seat opposite him and pushing the breakfast she had made across the table for him to eat.
Farrell picked up his fork, but didn't touch his food. He lifted his head, glancing across the table at Nevina. She was an unusual woman. With blonde shaggy hair and naturally light skin, she wore heavy make-up around her eyes and had bright red lips. Her nails were painted, and covering each forearm, she wore extensive tattoos of many different pictures fitting together. It looked indeed as if she had travelled far in her life, and to many places.
Nevina weaved her fingers together, leaning forwards on her elbows as she rested her chin upon the back of her hands.
'You're not eating.'
'I just can't get her face out of my mind' Farrell went on, ignoring her comment.
'Perhaps it's a sign from the gods.'
'You know I don't believe in that rubbish' Farrell scowled.
'You might call it rubbish' Nevina smirked knowingly, 'others however feel quite strongly to the contrary.' She pushed her chair back, rising to stand. 'I have seen many things in my life' she told him vaguely as she glided out of the kitchen, 'many incredible things that no one can even begin to explain. I wouldn't be so quick to dismiss any notion of a god if I were you.'
Silence followed her, and by the time Farrell raised his head, he realised she was gone. He had been so deep in thought, that his breakfast by the time he ate it, was stone cold.

Farrell left his home shortly after; there were still questions that he wanted to ask Nevina, so he went searching for her. He found her in the centre of the town, sitting upon her cart as if waiting for him. The cart carried all her worldly possessions, alongside all the other curious things she would buy and sell over the years. It was a modest cart, with a seat at the front for a single person to sit behind the pony that pulled it. The pony was a strange creature, too small to be comfortably ridden by anyone other than a child. Its body and neck were brown and black striped, and its legs and face were pure white. Like everything else about her, it was strange.

Farrell approached the cart, Nevina watched him closely as he did so. He stopped beside her, noticing then that everything within the cart was all tied down and covered with a sheet that would repel the rain. Her pony was strapped to the cart with all its harnesses in place, and Nevina herself sat in the seat, wearing her travelling cloak, thick and warm and a little dishevelled.

'You're leaving?' Farrell asked in surprise.

'I've stayed here for far too long' Nevina said to him. 'I have so much still to do, so much still to see. The world is out there, its waiting for me.'

'I won't see you again' Farrell said to her, not as a question, but as a statement.

As he said this, he felt a sudden pang of loneliness, as he realised he was losing her forever.

Nevina smiled warmly at him, she leant forward, grabbing his shirt and pulling him towards her. She gave him a gift of one last kiss that was all too brief, before sitting back in her seat and snapping the reins. Her pony jerked its head back, walking briskly forwards.

'I've still so much to ask you' Farrell called after her. 'I need your advice!'

'Look to your heart' she called back to him, barely glancing around as her pony pulled her onwards. 'Your instincts will tell you what to do, but if you insist on my advice…' she turned fully to him now, 'find your daughter.'

She snapped the reins again, sending the pony into a canter, and in no time at all, she was gone forever from Farrell's life.

Farrell stood there, feeling more lost and alone than he had done in years. At last he forced himself to turn away, and walk back to his home. Upon the sight of it, he felt even more depressed.

His home, once well cared for and grand, had now fallen into ruins. Since his wife's death all those years ago, his life had fallen into ruins alongside it, as had everything around him. He no longer held his position as the highest-ranking soldier in the kingdom, and over the last few years, had spent his days only existing, with no longer any purpose in life. He had been forced to sell many of his possessions in order to survive. His servants, once having many, he had been forced to discharge; now he had none. His mares, tens of which he had once owned, he had sold, along with all their foals. He now lived completely alone in his large house, which inside was empty of everything besides the most basic of essentials. The house itself had fallen into disrepair, on his own he had not been able to care for it, and had not the money to pay for its upkeep. All he had now was an empty building, and Alastor. His faithful

horse which he had managed to keep was now old and worn like his master, the beast had greyed and slowed over the ages, but was still fit to ride.
Farrell called Alastor over to him as he walked slowly up the stone path, meandering around the tall weeds that grew between the flagstones. The mighty stallion lifted his head, trotting across the field on command and stopping before him.
Farrell smiled warmly up at the stallion, reaching over the fence and stroking him affectionately, before moving off again. Alastor stayed where he was, lowering his head to eat grass and flicking his tail.
Farrell ambled up the steps to his home, and towards the front door. He paused before them, remembering suddenly how Ramana used to struggle to open them, and how annoyed she would get when she couldn't do it. He felt sad then, regretting so much in his life, as he had every day since the day she died. He missed her so dearly; it felt like a physical pain in his heart that was almost unbearable. She had meant so much to him, now……there was no going back.
And then he thought of Amaia.
Farrell walked forwards, opening the door to his home and closing it behind him.
He stood there in the entrance hall, taking in his surroundings. This place, once a home so warm and full of life, was now cold and barren. Farrell's attention drifted towards the stairs, and he remembered how Amaia used to run up and down them, and how he used to tell her off for doing so, saying how if she carried on she would one day hurt herself. But she never listened, stubborn as she was, just like her mother.
He looked to his right, where there was upon the wall, a great painting of himself, standing beside his wife, with their daughter between them. They all looked so happy in the painting, as happy as they had once been. Farrell remembered then with a flicker of a smile, the day that it was painted. The way Ramana had fussed over anything that wasn't to her satisfaction. The way Amaia had fidgeted so much and complained, after which Ramana began to complain too. By the end of it, he had been so exasperated with the both of them he was ready to pull his hair out.
Farrell crossed the entrance hall, pausing for a moment as he noticed a mirror upon the wall.
He approached, standing before it and looking back at his tired self.
He was nearly fifty years of age now, but he looked older than that, and felt older still. His skin was worn like old parchment, and there were wrinkles at the corners of his eyes. His hair had grown streaked with grey, as had his beard which was scruffy and unkempt.
Farrell moved away from the mirror, feeling even lower, a broken shadow of his younger self. He turned slowly and lowered himself down to sit upon the bottom of the stairs. He brought his feet up, placing his arms around his knees, and sighed.
He thought of how meaningless his life had become. He thought of what he might do for the rest of the day, and almost nothing came to mind that was of any value.
And then he thought, of tonight. He was sure that when he slept, he would dream of her again, and she would tell him again, the same thing.

'Find me….'

‘If I dream the same dream tonight’ Farrell spoke to himself, his voice echoing in the empty hall, ‘I will take it as a sign. If I dream the same dream tonight, then I will leave this place and never look back.’
But something inside him held him back. Ramana he knew was dead, but Amaia had never been found, dead or alive. Was there really a change that she could have survived after all this time? Farrell was reluctant to give into the possibility. He had already come to terms with her disappearance, and didn’t want to suffer false hope.
‘But…’ Farrell mused to himself. ‘What if……?’

That night he slept, and the next morning he rose early, dressing quickly he slipped on his boots before storming from the house.
The dream had come again, as he was sure it would, and he felt in his heart now that it would haunt him until he found her. One way or the other.
Farrell strode down the path heading towards the town and in the direction of the home where Alice lived, his brother’s widow.

Alice was sitting at the table in the kitchen having breakfast with her children when Farrell knocked on the door. Her son Shawn answered the door, and Farrell asked if he could come in.
Shawn moved back, allowing Farrell to enter.
‘Farrell’ Alice said in surprise at the sight of him. ‘How lovely, I haven’t seen you in…gods how long has it been?’
‘Can I sit down?’ Farrell asked her.
‘Of course,’ Alice smiled at him, and Farrell took the only remaining seat that was unoccupied, the seat his brother used to sit.
Farrell glanced across the table at Alice. He had hardly seen her at all over the past twelve years, and he realised now as he sat before her, how she had aged. She was still pretty, but twelve years was a long time, and the loss of her husband had taken its toll on her, she was greyer, and skinnier than she had been before. Even so, she still looked far better than he did.
On one side of her sat her daughter, Gracie. Nineteen years old now, she was a beautiful young woman, no longer the childish girl Amaia used to play with all those years ago. Now she sat with a good posture and an air of pride and maturity. Farrell then thought with sadness, that Amaia might have perhaps been the same.
Shawn had closed the door, returning to the kitchen, he sat beside his mother on her other side from Gracie. Farrell glanced at him. He was a fully-grown man now, handsome, and in height towering over his mother and sister.
They were a beautiful family together, the three of them. And even though Alice had lost her husband, as Farrell had lost his wife, she had managed to continue on with life. Farrell thought then what was, and what could have been.
‘What can we do for you?’ Shawn spoke up. ‘You never visit anymore. Is there something wrong?’
Farrell smiled uncertainly, wondering how what he was about to say would sound, and how they would take it.
‘Not wrong no’ he said slowly. ‘I'm not sure I know how best to explain.’

‘Just give it a try’ Alice said encouragingly, quickly finishing her breakfast and pushing her plate to one side. ‘There’s no harm in that.’ Beside her Gracie listened silently.
‘Do you remember’ Farrell began, ‘it’s not a nice memory I know, but do you remember the day that Ramana died?’
Alice immediately pursed her lips, glancing away from him briefly before facing him again.
‘I do’ she said shortly.
Shawn watched Farrell carefully, wondering where he was going with this.
‘I just had a recent thought’ Farrell went on. ‘Amaia, my daughter…her body was never found.’
‘And this thought has only been a recent one?’ Gracie spoke up for the first time.
Farrell glanced at her; she sat rigid in her chair. He wondered how she had taken the loss of her childhood friend. They had been very close. Perhaps she blamed him. He had never known, had always assumed she was too young to fully understand.
‘I have had these dreams’ Farrell spoke to her now, ‘that plague me every night.’
‘And what do these dreams tell you?’ Alice asked him.
Find me….
‘I see this young woman’ Farrell said. ‘She looks like Ramana, but she isn’t.’ Farrell fidgeted in his chair. ‘She looks like what my daughter might look like if she was alive now.’
‘So, you think that because you’ve had dreams she might still be alive?’ Shawn asked.
‘Yes.’
‘After all this time?’
‘Maybe’ Farrell shrugged, sensing his hesitation. ‘Look, if there is a chance that she is alive, I have to find her…I have to at least try.’
‘Why didn’t you do this sooner?’ Gracie asked him. ‘It’s been over ten years since that day.’
‘I've no excuse’ Farrell said. ‘I just…...always assumed she was dead.’
‘And now you assume she’s alive’ Gracie went on. ‘Because you had a dream one night?’
Farrell felt her scepticism in her tone.
‘I feel she *might* be alive’ he corrected.
‘Because you had a dream about someone who *might* be her’ Gracie finished flatly.
‘It wasn’t just one dream’ Farrell told her. ‘Since the very first one I've had, they have come to me, every single night. And it’s always the same.’
Find me….
‘It’s beginning to haunt me’ Farrell said. ‘I can’t get away from it.’
‘So why did you come here?’ Shawn asked him. ‘Why are you telling us all of this?’
‘I can’t look for her on my own. I need help. And…. there was someone else…. whom she meant a lot to.’
‘Who?’ Shawn asked.
‘My brother’ Farrell said, lifting his head.
‘Ah’ Shawn realised.
‘If I search for her, I need his help.’
‘And that’s why you came here’ Shawn clarified. ‘Because you need to find him.’
‘I don’t think Arlen would want to see you’ Alice told him uncertainly.
‘I know’ Farrell sighed miserably. ‘But if I am to do this, then I need his help.’
‘So…’ Gracie said, ‘you want us to tell you where he lives.’

There was a long pause before Farrell was ready to answer.
'Yes.'
Gracie and Shawn both looked to their mother, waiting for her response.
'You think there might really be a chance that she is alive?' she asked Farrell.
'I believe so.'
'Alright' Alice said rising to her feet and moving towards a dresser nearby. 'I shall tell you where you might find him.'
For years since Arlen had first left his home the day Ramana had died, he had still kept in contact with Alice and her children. Arlen still had a deep love for Brice's family, and cared a lot for them, even after all this time he still wrote to them regularly.
'His address changes every so often' Alice said as she opened one of the drawers and sifted through a pile of letters. 'He travels often now from one place to the next. He's changed a lot since you last saw him.'
She picked one of the letters out of the stack, and handed it to him.
'This is the last letter he sent us.'
Farrell took it carefully, glancing at the date. It was sent a week ago.
'Stonegate' he said reading the address. 'That's a long way from here.'
'He's been staying there for a few weeks now' Alice told him. 'You're most likely to find him there. But if you are serious about finding him, I wouldn't waste time. He never stays in one spot for too long.'
'Thank you' Farrell nodded to her. 'You've helped me greatly.'
'You can keep that letter if you want' Alice said.
'Thank you.'
'So when do you leave?' Alice asked him.
'Now…tonight…. soon.' Farrell folded up the letter carefully, pocketing it. 'I just need to sort out a few things before I go. Thank you for your help' he said again rising.
He made to leave the room, but before he could reach the front door, Shawn called out to him.
'Wait!'
Farrell hesitated, turning back.
'Do you really think you can find her?'
'Yes, I do' Farrell answered quietly.
'Then I want to come with you.'
'Shawn' Alice cried in dismay, as Farrell stood with a look of stunned disbelief. 'You can't just leave us like that!'
'I'm not going to be gone forever' Shawn said in his defence. 'But Amaia meant a lot to all of us, I thinks it's important that I help find her, if she is alive, then she needs to come home.'
'I miss her too' Gracie voiced. 'But if you leave, then who will protect us?'
'I'll come back' Shawn smiled at his sister. 'I promise. I won't leave you two alone for too long. You will be safe here, and you will cope just fine without me, I'm sure of it.'
Alice frowned at her son unconvinced. 'I don't want you to get hurt.'
'Nothing will happen to me' Shawn said. 'Honestly mother, you fuss too much. When do you plan to leave?' he asked speaking to Farrell now.

‘I hadn’t a date planned yet, but soon. If you are absolutely sure you want to come, I will tell you before I leave. In the meantime, you have time to prepare.’
‘Then it’s settled’ Shawn said facing his mother and sister. ‘Don’t worry; I’ll be back before you know it.’
And with that, Farrell left the home, even more determined in his mind now than before he entered. He walked briskly, thinking of the thing in his pocket. Arlen’s letter to Alice and her children.

Over the next few days, Farrell began to prepare. He sold his home, and everything inside that was left, including the painting of himself with his wife and daughter. He didn’t want to sell it, he would have brought it with him if he could, but Alastor had enough to carry already now. He was old, and with Farrell and his other meagre possession like clothes and food and other essentials, Farrell didn’t want to tire out the already weary animal. He had served Farrell well over the years in battle, and deserved an easy life. And so, when the time came, Farrell looked over his home one last time. Alastor was saddled and ready to go, carrying all the things that Farrell needed, including the money he had gained from selling his home. It was a handsome amount, and would see both he and his horse well care for, for many months to come.
Everything Alastor carried now, was everything Farrell had left in the world.

Farrell met Shawn outside his home; he was sitting upon his own chestnut stallion, waiting for Farrell and ready to go. He had said his farewells to his family, and as Farrell walked Alastor past, Shawn tapped his heels into the horse’s side to urge him on, walking beside Alastor. Shawn’s mother and sister stood side by side outside their home, watching the two leave and waving to them as they went.
As they reached the open plains, Farrell glanced one last time towards the small town he had spent nearly his entire life in. And then he turned his back. No longer would he feel regret and sorrow. Now he moved forwards, now he had a purpose in life.
He would find Amaia, alive or dead. He would find Amaia one way or the other, and solve the mystery of what truly happened on that terrible day, once and for all.

Chapter Twenty
Gods and Camels

‘What would you say to her’ Shawn asked him, ‘if we find her?’
They had been sitting in silence for several hours, and the question completely caught Farrell off guard. He had no idea how best to answer.

What *would* he say?
'I don't know' Farrell admitted. 'It's been so long.'
'I would tell her how much I have missed her over the years' Shawn spoke, 'how her absence has been like a gaping hole in my life…...in my mother's life……in my sister's life.' Shawn lifted his eyes to Farrell, gazing at him from across the dancing fire around which they sat. 'I would tell her…that I have never forgotten about her, not even for a moment, and that I have longed with all my heart to see her alive and well.' Shawn lowered his head, falling silent. 'That is what I would say to her' he mumbled.
Farrell blinked quickly as he listened to Shawn's words, feeling hollow within.
'I'm tired' Shawn said, grabbing a blanket from nearby and pulling it over him. 'I will see you in the morning.' He rolled over, lying on his side with his back to Farrell. He quickly became still.
Farrell watched him, feeling a strange sensation inside him, a sensation he could not name, but one mixed with loneliness. He felt so detached from the world, from everything around him. It was as if he didn't know *how* to live anymore.
He felt even stranger now setting out to look for his daughter. He wondered what he might find, and where his path would lead. Farrell thought for a moment.
What if she really is alive?
He hardly dared to believe it, to *truly* believe it.
He wondered what it would be like to meet her. What she might look like. Perhaps a lot like her mother, perhaps a lot like the woman he saw in his dreams.
Farrell took his own blanket from his bags; he quickly put out the fire, before lying down upon the earth to sleep. He listened to Alastor breathing nearby, the stallion's heavy feet thumping on the ground as he shifted from one leg to the other. Farrell heaved a deep sigh, allowing his body to relax.
He began to dream.
Everything was still. The low sun shone through the columns of the trees, casting long shadows upon the forest floor. He saw a figure in the woods, standing with her back to him. She turned around.
'I am still alive. Find me….'

Farrell gasped, waking with a jolt. The plains around them were bright with morning light, and Shawn was already awake. He was serving himself a cold breakfast, sitting hunched over with a blanket around his shoulders. It was still early morning, and the nights chill still clung in the air around them.
'You sleep heavily' Shawn noted as Farrell sat gingerly up, rubbing the sleep from his eyes.
'What time is it?'
'About seven o'clock' Shawn replied.
'We should get going.'
'What's the rush?' Shawn asked.
Farrell chewed his lip.
'You're anxious to see her.'
'I love my daughter' Farrell replied. 'To see her face again…. I don't know….it would be the best possible feeling.'

Shawn watched him closely; then continued to eat. ‘You're probably right. It’s a long way to where we’re going. The journey will take us several days.’
Farrell, who had been rooting through his bag searching for food, came across the letter Arlen had written to Alice and her family. He picked it up tentatively, staring down at it. Within the letter he read, Farrell could see the warmth and compassion Arlen still had for Alice and her family. Even after everything that had happened, even after all those years he had been away, he had never forgotten about Alice, nor his promise to be there for them, after Brice had died.
Farrell found himself wishing he had the same dedication. If he had…. perhaps Ramana might still be alive….and Amaia would not have been taken. Perhaps if he had been there for them when they needed him the most, he might have been able to save them, to protect his family like he should have done.
‘Are you coming?’ Shawn spoke up suddenly, breaking Farrell’s thoughts.
Farrell lifted his head to Shawn who was already waiting in the saddle, having already packed up his bags and laden them on his horse.
‘What?’ Farrell stammered.
‘You're anxious to hurry’ Shawn told him. ‘I am obliging. You can eat in the saddle, or I can wait for you here if you want.’
‘No no’ Farrell said hurriedly. ‘I’m coming.’
Shawn watched as Farrell quickly gathered together his possessions, loading them onto Alastor. As Farrell mounted the saddle, Alastor gave a heavy groan.
‘Are you sure he’s up for such a journey’ Shawn asked with concern as he gazed towards the black stallion.
‘He’ll have to be’ Farrell replied. ‘He’s a bit out of practice for sure, he hasn’t had much exercise in a while…but he’s the only horse I have now.’
‘You have money with you. Perhaps when we reach Stonegate you can buy another younger horse.’
‘No’ Farrell shot quickly. ‘Alastor is very dear to me. He’s all I have left now. I want to be with him to the end. He has perhaps only a few short years left in him, but he has been loyal to me always, and I want to be there for him.’
Shawn gave a shrug. ‘Fair enough.’
He tapped his heels lightly into the flanks of his own horse, a beautiful chestnut stallion in the prime of his life. Thorn was his name.
‘The land here is flat enough’ Shawn was saying as they rode. ‘Our journey should be easy.’
‘You’ve been this way before?’ Farrell asked, urging Alastor forwards.
‘More than once.’
‘I didn’t know.’
Shawn gave Farrell a sceptical look as Farrell walked his horse beside his.
‘I have left my home on more than one occasion. I will not be confined to such a small town my entire life. I want to see the world.’
‘Is that why you're coming along with me?’ Farrell asked. ‘To see the world?’
‘No. I am coming with you, to find Amaia. She was very dear to me, and I cared for her greatly. If we find her alive and well…that would be the best moment of my life.’
Farrell blinked at him.

‘What do you think are the chances of finding her alive?’ Farrell asked Shawn, feeling almost scared for the answer.
‘Very slim’ Shawn replied simply.
‘And you’re still willing to look for her?’
‘It’s been twelve years. The chances of her actually being alive after all this time are next to none. But I will still help search for her, because if there is even the slimmest chance that she has made it, I’ll take it. It’s the best we’ve got. We must pray for her safety, and hope the gods are on our side.’
‘Pray’ Farrell scoffed. ‘What good has ever come from prayer?’
‘Have you ever tried it?’ Shawn asked.
‘No.’
‘Then how do you know it doesn’t work?’
‘Things happen because men make them happen’ Farrell answered. ‘Or because nature makes it happen.’
‘How do you know that the gods do not control what men do?’ Shawn asked. ‘How do you know that the gods do not control nature itself? Could you explain why the wind blows? Or what makes the sun set and the moon glow? Where does one go when the other is present? The gods know all of these things.’
‘How do you know anything of the gods’ Farrell asked sceptically. ‘How do you know anything of what you hear from the holy men and women is true? You have no proof.’
‘I do not need proof’ Shawn replied, ‘because I have faith.’
‘Faith’ Farrell laughed dryly. ‘Faith is the excuse people use when they have no other answer. Faith is the excuse people use when there is no evidence.’
‘Then where did we all come from?’
‘Don’t pretend you know the answer to that. I am happy being true to myself in saying that I do not know. I will not make up an answer in order to please myself.’
‘But don’t you ever wonder about things you do not know?’ Shawn asked.
‘No. I care about what I can see and what I know is real.’
‘Than how do you know camels exist? You’ve never seen one.’
‘Because I know people who have seen them.’
‘Arlen has faith. But you do not follow his beliefs.’
Farrell pursed his lips in irritation. ‘Arlen is gullible. The only difference in your argument between gods and camels is that I can travel to where camels live and see them for myself.’
‘But you haven’t’ Shawn argued. ‘You have never seen a camel, and yet you still believe they exist. Funny isn’t it?’
Shawn smirked. He tapped his heels and sent his horse into a trot.

Four days and four nights they travelled, and as Farrell drew closer to the town of Stonegate, he grew ever more nervous. He couldn’t get out of his head the last time he had seen his brother, and last words that Arlen had said to him.
I HATE YOU! I HATE YOU! I NEVER WANT TO SEE YOU AGAIN!
If I ever see you again, I will kill you.

Farrell felt a shiver down his spine as the memory of the voice rang though his mind; and he wondered how Arlen would react when they met at last. Perhaps he had forgotten that day. Perhaps he had forgiven Farrell; it was twelve years ago after all.
'Something on your mind?' Shawn asked him as they rode.
'No' Farrell shook his head. 'Nothing at all.'
It was a long detour around the mountains, but after four sunsets, their destination came into sight.

It was a rancid town, filthy and full of squalor. The cobbled streets were rickety and full of grime, the dirty houses and buildings built close to one another made the whole place feel like a trap. The very air that surrounded the town was dirty, as if the place had its own atmosphere, even the people were filthy.
'This?' Farrell asked. 'This is where Arlen lives?'
'Arlen moves from place to place, and yes, this is where he lives at the moment. Have you never been here before?'
'I've travelled a lot in my life' Farrell admitted, 'but I've never been here.'
They were forced to dismount and walk beside their horses, as it was far easier to lead them on foot as they made their way through the crowed and dank place with its narrow winding roads. Farrell watched the faces of people they passed. Their skin was full of grime, their clothes were poor and many had missing teeth. This was a side-effect of a drug often taken by those who had given up on their own lives, when everything else worth living for was gone. It was very addictive, very expensive, and sold by violent gang leaders for extortionate amounts of money.
Farrell's hand touched his sword unconsciously and he glanced towards Shawn.
'Do you have any weapons on you?
'A couple of knives' Shawn answered back in a murmur, 'though if it came down to it I can fight bare-fisted if I must.'
'I don't doubt.'
Shawn led the way along the road that weaved this way and that; it was as if the road itself wasn't sure which direction it was going. Several times Farrell glanced around, seeing many eyes upon him.
'Why do they stare?' he asked Shawn.
'Because of your horse' Shawn replied quickly and quietly. 'Most have probably never seen a black one. Keep your wits about you; this is a dangerous town to those who can't protect themselves.'
'Where are all the women?' Farrell asked.
'They only come out at night.'
'Who protect them?'
'Whoever owns them.'
Farrell felt a twinge of nervousness as they walked, feeling so lost in this town. It felt as if he had entered a different world entirely.
'It's not that far now' Shawn reassured him.
'This place seems huge' Farrell said nervously.

‘It’s not that big, it just feels so because the roads are so twisted.’ He paused, turning back to Farrell. ‘Have you got that letter?’
Farrell produced it from inside his coat pocket and handed it to him. Shawn glanced at it with a bored expression, looking over the address briefly, before handing it back to Farrell.
‘It’s this way’ Shawn pointed.
Farrell followed him down the dark alley.
Sometime later Shawn stopped suddenly.
‘What is it?’ Farrell asked.
‘We’re here.’
Farrell looked up at the building that stood beside them. It seemed to be some kind of inn, though not the kind that Farrell had seen before. This one was not warm and welcoming; at first glance Farrell hadn’t even recognised it as an inn at all.
‘Come on’ Shawn said. ‘We can tie the horses at the back.’
Alastor and Thorn were left outside the inn in a small courtyard away from the alley. Shawn and Farrell entered the main doors of the inn at the front.
Farrell stood in the entrance, taking in the environment around him.
It was a crowded place, and dark. There were blankets covering the windows, and burning candles dotted about the place kept back the total darkness. Many hunched figures sat around tables drinking, despite it being the middle of the day.
‘Wait here’ Shawn murmured to him. ‘I’ll go ask at the bar.’
Farrell watched Shawn walk away, feeling suddenly alone and out of his depth.
A figure sitting by one of the tables lifted his heavy eyes, seeing Shawn walking through the inn. His attention slid towards the door, towards Farrell.
The figure stiffened suddenly. He patted the waist of the long red-haired woman who sat on his lap, indicating for her to get off him.
The figure slowly stood.
Farrell watched Shawn lean upon the bar, speaking to the barman in a low voice. He saw movement to his side. Farrell jerked his head back suddenly; the knife just missed him by inches. He wheeled around to the direction the knife had come from. All around the room people had frozen, some in mid conversation, some with tankards half-way to their lips.
Everything was suddenly silent.
Farrell searched, but he could not find the culprit in the many faces that stared at him. He looked at each and every man whom he thought might have thrown the dagger, but his attention sailed right past the man he was searching for. His brother.
Suddenly one of the men began to chuckle. Farrell’s attention turned straight to him, but still there was no flicker of recognition.
‘Who do you think you are,’ the man said, ‘to show your face here?’
‘Who are you?’ Farrell asked him as the man slowly approached him
‘Come now. I know I must have changed a lot over the years but you can recognise my voice at least?’
‘Arlen?’ Farrell said incredulous.
Arlen sneered back at him.
‘Is that really you?’ Farrell asked.

Arlen was no longer the young and handsome, clean-shaven princely figure Farrell had once known. Now he was different, and in so many ways, not only his appearance, but his aura as well. He seemed bigger, more muscular, as if he had spent years fighting. There were little scars here and there over his body, on his face and arms. He was missing a finger from each hand, and his nose looked as if it had been broken at least once. He had grown a beard now, something Farrell had never seen on him before, and he had dark makeup painted around his eyes. Like a pirate or a gypsy. Or a whore.

'Look at you' Farrell gasped. 'You've changed...'

'The years have a way of changing people' Arlen replied coolly.

Farrell's shoulders slumped and he sighed deeply.

'Brother…'

In an instant Arlen was before him, moving faster and with more precision than Farrell thought possible of him. He slashed Farrell's arm, causing him to stumble back. He had cut him deep.

'Arlen…what…?'

Farrell managed to draw his sword in time to block the next attack. He stared at Arlen; his teeth were bared in anger as he snarled hatefully back at Farrell.

'I am not your brother' Arlen whispered dangerously.

'You've still not forgiven me then?' Farrell asked sadly, arm beginning to shake as he grasped his sword, holding Arlen back. 'Even after all this time?'

'A thousand million years could pass,' Arlen screamed at him, 'and I would *still* not forgive you!'

He pushed Farrell back, and the crowd around them began to cheer, rising from their seats and moving away to clear a space, some even standing on tables to watch. The barman however watched only with disinterest as he carried on with his work, like he had seen this a thousand times before.

'A great arena' Arlen called jovially throwing his arms out. 'As good as any I suppose.'

'I will not fight you' Farrell spoke firmly.

'That's a shame' Arlen sighed relaxing slightly. 'Because if you don't fight……you'll *die*.'

He lunged forward, swinging his sword. The crowd began to clap and cheer and roar in approval.

'Arlen!' Farrell called. 'Please stop this!'

Arlen ignored his brother's cries, lunging to strike him again. Farrell again blocked the next blow. Farrell parried and danced out of the way, never moving to attack, only the defend himself.

'I won't hurt you brother' Farrell shouted back at him.

'Then I hope you enjoy it in the afterlife' Arlen sneered dryly. 'Send me a postcard while you're there. Perhaps you will find Ramana, and you can beg *her* for forgiveness.'

Farrell gritted his teeth; it was his turn to sneer now.

'Arlen' he said, lowering his sword and taking a step towards him.

Arlen drew quickly back away from him, twirling his sword in the air.

Farrell lifted his weapon, advancing towards his brother, ready to attack.

'Don't you speak of Ramana.'

Arlen began to cackle at him. 'Have I gotten under your skin?!'

Farrell's face contorted with rage as he moved closer towards Arlen, raising his sword to strike. He halted suddenly in his tracks; a look of utter shock crossed his face. The sword he held slipped from his grasp.
'What's happening to me?!' Farrell whispered.
He turned from Arlen, stumbling and grabbing onto a table for support. He looked towards his arm where Arlen had cut him.
'Poison' he gasped. 'How…could…?'
He collapsed, now on all fours, gasping and struggling to breathe.
'I told you' Arlen sang. 'I told you, didn't I? That if I ever saw you again I would kill you. You should have listened.'
'Arlen…' Farrell groaned, shaking as he struggled to push himself up again.
'Your heart will stop soon' Arlen said casually. 'Make the most of life now while you can.'
Farrell began to pale. His vision clouded over, as his whole body began to shake violently. His grip slipped from the table edge and he fell to the floor again.
'Please!'
Arlen jerked his head around to another figure who had thrown himself to his knees before him.
'Please' Shawn begged him. 'Please don't kill him.'
'He must die' Arlen told him coldly.
'Farrell has seen the error of his ways' Shawn cried, grabbing onto the bottom of Arlen's coat. 'He has come to you to make amends.'
'It is too late!' Arlen snarled down at him. 'Ramana is *dead*!'
'But Amaia might still be alive' Shawn whispered. 'We've come to you together to ask for your help in finding her.'
'What makes you think she is still alive?'
Shawn glanced back at Farrell who lay on the floor, his breath shallow now. He was almost utterly still. Shawn looked back at Arlen.
'He has had a vision' Shawn urged. 'He believes Amaia might still be alive.'
Arlen lifted his painted eyes to his brother calmly.
'It doesn't matter' he replied. 'He's dead.'
Shawn swung round to Farrell. His body was completely still as if frozen in time, his breath no more, and his eyes stare blankly.
It was true.
He was dead.

Chapter Twenty-One
Flower's New Life

'Farrell?'
He felt someone shaking his shoulder.
'Wake up silly.'

Farrell opened his eyes, seeing a woman leaning over him with long black hair falling about her face.
'Ramana' he breathed. 'What are you doing?'
'I'm waking you up' she smiled. 'I already told you that.'
She walked to his side around the sofa, reaching her hands out for Farrell to take.
He took them, and she pulled him up into a stand.
'Daddy!'
'How many times do I have to tell you not to run up and down the stairs?' Farrell said sternly to the young girl.
'Sorry daddy' Amaia said, stopping before him.
Farrell frowned down at her in displeasure. 'I only say this for your own benefit' he told her, 'not to nag or annoy you.'
'That's what I say to you' Ramana protested. 'But you never listen.'
Farrell groaned, placing his hand over his face. 'I'm outnumbered by women' he sighed. 'You two will be the death of me. Will you be happy once I'm gone? Is that your plan? To nag me into an early grave?'
'Oh husband' Ramana chuckled lightly. 'You overreact over such small things.'
'Small to you but when you have to live with it…'
'Shhh' Ramana soothed, placing a finger over Farrell's lips to silence him. 'No more talk.' She cocked her head playfully at him. 'Dance with me.'
Amaia sat upon the sofa to watch them dance, with a little green bird sitting upon her lap.
Ramana led Farrell away, holding his hand ever so tenderly. She pulled him to the centre of the hall; then stopped.
She turned to face him.
Farrell placed one hand upon her waist as she placed one hand upon his shoulder. Their other hands they held in each other's.
They began to dance. Moving slowly around in circles and never taking their eyes off each other.
'You are so beautiful.'
'I was going to say the same thing about you' Ramana purred seductively back.
Farrell shared a smile with her as they turned.
'I'm just so lucky to have you' he told her. 'I want us to be together forever.'
'That is what I want also.'
But then Ramana stopped dancing, and let go of him.
She suddenly grabbed him by the shoulders, throwing him against the wall.
'Farrell!' she shouted at him.
She slapped him.
'Farrell wake up!'
He felt his body being shaken, and then with a gasp everything around him changed.
The next thing he knew, he was lying on his back, staring up at an unfamiliar ceiling.
Farrell blinked in confusion, the memory of dancing with his wife and seeing his young daughter quickly faded from his mind until it was completely forgotten.
Farrell drew a slow breath, eyes darting all around him in panic and alarm as he wondered where he was.

‘Farrell!’ came the loud voice again. A face came into view as a figure leant forward over him.
Someone slapped his face roughly, shaking his body.
‘Are you awake Farrell?!’
Farrell’s eyes adjusted as his senses returned to him, a vivid memory of what had happened to him before he collapsed came flooding back.
‘What happened to me?’ Farrell breathed.
‘I killed you’ Arlen smiled above him. ‘How does it feel to come back to life?’
Farrell’s body tensed immediately as he remembered what had happened, and he stared back at Arlen with an emotion he had never felt towards his brother before.
It was fear.
‘You poisoned me’ Farrell said in utter disbelief. ‘You poisoned me.’
‘How does it feel’ Arlen asked him coldly, expression growing dark, ‘to be betrayed?’
‘The brother I knew would never act this way’ Farrell said trying to reason the situation and make sense of what had just happened to him. ‘What would the gods think if they saw you now?’
‘You don’t believe in gods’ Arlen replied flatly.
‘But you do’ Farrell told him. ‘You used to pray…all the time…to Faeroe…to Ludus…’
‘Ludus can go fuck herself!’
Farrell sat bolt upright, drawing away from his brother in fear and uncertainty, nearly falling off the table as he did so.
He stared at his brother in utter shock and disbelief. He couldn’t believe what he just heard him say.
‘You used to pray all the time…’ Farrell whispered staring at Arlen hard. ‘Who *are* you?’
‘I am not the brother you once knew’ Arlen told him in a low voice. ‘I don’t pray anymore.’
Arlen snarled then, baring his teeth in savagery, like a feral beast. ‘I curse the gods’ he spat, ‘for all the misfortune and suffering they have brought unto me.’
‘How am I alive?’ Farrell asked. ‘I thought……I thought I died…. I thought the poison….’
‘I would have let you die’ Arlen said carelessly, ‘but Shawn convinced me to do otherwise.’
It was only then that Farrell noticed Shawn standing by him amongst the crowd of strangers that stared. Shawn smiled in relief at Farrell, placing a comforting hand upon his shoulder.
‘Thank the gods you’re alive’ he sighed. ‘I was sure for a moment that….’
Farrell noticed his surroundings then. He was still at the inn, around him most of the people who had stood and cheered as he fought with Arlen, now returned their attention to what they had previously been doing. He had been dumped on one of the tables, where he had woken.
‘What did you do to me’ Farrell asked Arlen, touching his own chest. ‘I feel strange.’
‘I restarted your heart.’
Farrell lifted his head.
‘I have the poison’ Arlen said, ‘and I have the cure.’
‘Come on’ Farrell said to Shawn, swinging his legs over the edge of the table and coming gingerly to a stand. ‘Let’s go.’
‘We’re leaving?’ Shawn asked uncertainly.
Farrell staggered, straightening up again and wobbling as he headed to the door. His head was spinning but he kept moving.

‘But what about…?’
‘We will get no help here’ Farrell interrupted him. ‘It was a mistake coming here. Let’s go.’
‘But…’
‘Then stay’ Farrell shot back without stopping his slow journey to the door. ‘I will do this on my own if I have to.’
Shawn cast a pleading look towards Arlen as Farrell made his way gradually to the door. But Arlen did nothing. He did not look at Shawn. He didn’t even move.
Shawn turned from him, muttering his apologies to Arlen, before making his way after Farrell.

Farrell stumbled through the door, shielding his eyes from the blinding sheet of the sky, after the dark interior of the inn; it took a while for his sight to adjust.
‘Farrell?’ Shawn spoke with concern appearing beside him. ‘Are you alright?’
Farrell ignored him, walking away from him and around the back of the inn where they had tied their horses. As he moved, he moved slowly, holding the wall for support.
When he had reached the place, he froze in shock.
The horses both were gone.

Inside the inn, Arlen drew the curtain back. From within the shadows that hid him, he watched the two outside in their misfortune.

‘Please don’t tell me all your money was in your bags’ Shawn begged.
Farrell didn’t answer; he just put his face in his hands, groaning in despair at his loss.
‘My horse’ Shawn lamented, leaning against the wall and casting his head to the heavens. ‘Gone…’
‘That money’ Farrell moaned into his hands. ‘That was everything I had!’ He glanced down at himself, realising now that all he owned in the world was what he wore. ‘We haven’t even started looking for her yet…how can I…?’ His legs suddenly felt like water, and he fell to his knees. ‘Where do I go from here…no money….no horse…?’ He sobbed. ‘How can I even begin looking for her now?’
‘Where were you even planning to begin?’ Shawn asked him flatly.
Farrell lifted his head from his hands, staring off into nothing with eyes out of focus. ‘I don’t know’ he murmured. ‘I just…thought a solution would come to me…. I’ve been having these dreams….so vivid, so persistent…night after night….’ His body sagged. ‘I thought an answer would come to me…. I thought something might happen…that I might learn something that may point me in the right direction.’
‘And nothing more has come to you?’ Shawn asked. ‘Besides these dreams?’
‘No’ Farrell shook his head. ‘I thought……. I thought….’
‘Do you remember that day?’ Shawn asked him. ‘The day that Ramana died….and Amaia was taken?’
‘Yes’ Farrell said; his voice barely audible.

‘Do you remember the men you found?’ he asked him. ‘The men on the road that were dead?’
The memory of that tragic day, the day that had changed his life forever, suddenly flashed through Farrell’s mind.

Further down the road, Farrell and his men had ridden. They had passed a single dead man, who appeared to have no injury on him at all. It was a mystery how he died. But further along the road, was a mystery far deeper.
Farrell pulled his horse back, surveying the scene around him.
‘What in god’s name….’
The bodies of twelve soldiers lay scattered in their path, soldiers who were armed and armoured. They all bore the crest of the king, a wolf swallowing a half-moon.
It looked as if they had been ambushed.
Farrell ordered the soldiers that followed him, to check the men, to see if any were alive.
But they were all dead. And Amaia, could not be found.

‘Yes’ Farrell answered. ‘Those men…they looked like….’
‘Like what?’ Shawn asked.
‘Soldiers’ Farrell finished. ‘The king’s soldiers. They wore fine armour, the kind of armour I myself wore in days gone by…when I rode off to battle. The kings armour.’
‘Kings armour?’ Shawn repeated, sounding ever more confused. ‘You mean they were the king’s men you found dead?’
‘Yes’ Farrell said. ‘They bore the king’s crest.’
Shawn turned away, frowning furiously.
‘And so, the mystery deepens.’
‘It makes no sense’ Farrell growled, hitting the ground with a fist. ‘Ramana’s death, Amaia’s disappearance and those dead men wearing armour that bore the crest of the king…. the wolf swallowing a half-moon…’ He shook his head. ‘It just makes no sense...’
‘So’ Shawn sighed crossing his arms. ‘What do we do now?’
‘You can do whatever you want.’
‘What are *you* going to do then?’
Farrell went quiet.
‘Farrell?’ Shawn asked.
‘I don’t know’ Farrell said in a distant voice.
‘Are you going home?’
‘No’ Farrell answered quickly. ‘I can’t. I have no home…not anymore…I have nothing.’
‘What's this? You’ve lost both your horses? Well that’s not good.’
Farrell’s expression darkened at the mocking tone of his brother, who had followed them outside.
‘How could you let such a thing happen?’ Arlen asked them.
‘Accidents happen’ Farrell answered coldly rising to his feet. ‘People make mistakes.’
‘No’ Arlen shook his head. ‘The brother I once knew would never let his horse be stolen so easily. You're not him. You're an idiot.’
‘Did you only come out here to mock me?’

‘No’ Arlen shook his head again. ‘I came out here, because I wish to find Amaia also.’
‘I thought you would never help me’ Farrell said turning to him. ‘I thought you would only hate me.’
‘You're mistaken’ Arlen laughed. ‘I do still hate you, but our dept, to a point, is paid. I did warn you that I will kill you if I saw you again. I kept my word.’
Farrell turned his back to him, feeling cold and lost and alone and full of resentment.
‘So, you have a plan?’ Shawn spoke up. ‘You know where Amaia is or where she might be?’
‘I know a man’ Arlen corrected, ‘who knows many things, has many answers to many questions. He can help us.’
‘And you know where he is?’ Shawn persisted.
Farrell’s ears perked up in interest as he listened.
‘I do’ Arlen replied. ‘We will travel to him, but it is a long road.’
‘You mean you will let us come with you?’ Shawn asked hopefully.
‘Yes.’
‘When do we leave?’ Shawn asked.
‘Soon’ Arlen replied vaguely. ‘There is something I must do first.

Arlen walked the streets alone, navigating his way through the narrow alleyways of the dirty town. He had visited this place often and over the years had spent a long time here. He had come to know Stonegate with all its cracks and crevasses, as he knew the back of his hand.
He kept his head down as he walked, avoiding everyone around him, trapped in a world of his own. Arlen reached his destination, a wide bridge that stretched over a river located near the edge of the town. This path was the main road through the town, one of the more straighter roads and the one most often used by carriage drivers and those on horseback.
Arlen came to a halt, standing away from the bridge. The bustling figures moving along the congested road paid no attention to him as he leapt swiftly over wall, landing lightly on the bank at the river’s edge. Here, he made his way to a spot below the bridge, where a woman waited for him.
‘Arlen’ the woman gasped.
She ran to him, embracing him tightly; Arlen’s beefy arms wrapped around her skinny frame. She was a fairly tall woman, but her bony figure made her appear weaker than she really was. She was almost tiny in comparison to Arlen.
‘Karla’ Arlen breathed.
He held her by the shoulders, pushing her hair back so he could get a good look at her.
Karla’s long hair was dyed a bright and artificial red, and the makeup around her eyes matched that which Arlen wore.
‘Are you well?’
‘I am’ Karla sniffed. ‘Pulling a handkerchief from her sleeve and dabbing at the corners of her eyes. ‘I knew this day would come…but…oh Arlen……I will miss you terribly.’
‘I know. But I told you in the beginning, that the day will come when we will have to part ways. There are still chapters in my life left unfinished.’
‘I understand’ Karla replied, head hung low. ‘Though it doesn’t make our parting any easier.’
She looked up at him again.

‘Arlen…’ she said. ‘Do you truly love me?’
‘I do’ Arlen said, holding her face in his hands. ‘More than I ever thought I could, but…if I am ever to find my daughter again…’
‘I understand’ Karla said again. ‘You don’t need to explain. There is no place for me in your future.’
‘Karla’ Arlen winced. ‘Please don’t say such things.’
‘But it’s true’ Karla said drawing away from him. ‘Arlen. I want you to know, that you’ve given me some of the happiest years of my life. No man has ever treated me so well; it just feels so unfair that I have to lose you.’
‘I told you from the very beginning…’ Arlen said.
‘I know’ Karla sighed. ‘But it doesn’t make the loss any easier to bear.’
She stared at him hard, as if wishing to remember every detail of this moment.
Karla reached towards him, holding him again, and being held in turn. Arlen fought hard to hold back the tears.
They kissed, long and deep, before Karla stepped away from him, drifting backwards. She turned her back on him, pausing for a moment.
‘I will never forget you Arlen’ she said to him without turning. ‘I hope you find what you're looking for.’
And she walked away, out of Arlen’s life forever.

Arlen met with Shawn and Farrell shortly after, having packed his bags and readied his horse.
‘Are you ready to go?’ Shawn asked him.
Farrell just glowered.
‘Yes’ Arlen answered shortly. ‘Here.’ He tossed Shawn a small pouch of money. ‘You can buy new horses with this. There is a clock tower near the centre of this town. If you ask directions, you can find a man who sells horses near there.’
‘Wait, where are you going?’ Shawn called after him.
‘I will wait for you on the north-side of this town’ Arlen told him abruptly, leading his horse away as he spoke. ‘Do not keep me waiting too long.’

It was less than half-an hour later that the three set off. Farrell was feeling very uncomfortable upon the unfamiliar grey mare he rode, after spending so many years with his faithful steed Alastor.
‘Alastor’ Farrell sighed forlorn. ‘I don’t suppose I will ever see you again. I truly have left the past behind.’
‘What's that?’ Shawn asked riding his horse beside him. ‘Did you say something?’
‘No’ Farrell said hanging his head. ‘It’s nothing.’
Arlen who was riding ahead of them turned his head back slightly to glare at them both. He kicked his heels into his horse, sending the beast forwards in a canter.
Behind him Farrell and Shawn urged their horses on to match his stride. They rode swiftly for the rest of that day and long after the sun had set. They only rested briefly the next day, before setting off again at a quick pace.

‘I can’t believe it was that easy. What kind of a man leaves such a valuable horse unguarded?’ the man called Branden said as he admired the great black stallion.
‘A foolish man’ his friend Callum replied. He patted the neck of the brown stallion by his side. ‘Tis a fine creature. I shall have many wonderful adventures with him.’
‘My daughter will love this horse’ Branden said. ‘Even though he is rather old, I think he will be a wonderful gift for her. She is so hard to please, I am sure this will make her happy, and she can finally stop nagging me for at least a few minutes.’
His friend chuckled quietly to himself.
‘She knows what she likes doesn’t she?’ Callum said.
‘Just like her mother’ Branden agreed. ‘They are both very difficult.’
They reached the open field before the small cottage where Branden and his family lived. Callum waved to Branden’s wife who stood at the door. She waved back to him, turning inside the house to call her daughter, telling her that her father had come home.
‘What will you call him?’ Branden asked his friend.
‘Thunder Foot’ Callum smiled at the chestnut stallion.
Branden nodded happily.
‘What about you?’ Callum asked. ‘What will you call yours?’
‘That’s for my daughter to decide.’
‘Daddy! You’re home!’ a young girl, twelve years in age came running from the cottage, followed shortly by her mother. ‘What is that?’ she asked coming to a stop and gazing up at the tall horse in awe.
‘It’s a present’ Branden told his daughter. ‘For you.’
‘Are you sure that’s a good idea?’ Branden’s wife asked him unconvinced. ‘He’s a bit too big for her.’
‘Nonsense’ Branden said, helping his daughter climb upon the black stallions, who stood obediently still, patient with the young girl as she clambered awkwardly into the saddle. ‘And if that doesn’t convince you’ he said nodding with approval at the calm demeanour of the stallion, ‘maybe this will.’
He tossed a large pouch to his wife who opened it; her eyes grew large as she stared down at the contents.
‘There must be enough here to last two years!’
‘That’s only half of it’ the Branden smirked. ‘We split it’ he glanced to Callum. ‘Didn’t we?’
‘We sure did’ Callum winked back.
‘The ground is so far away’ the daughter gleamed, kicking her feet happily as she sat in the saddle.
Callum watched in amusement as the girl leant forward confidently, patting the horse’s neck.
‘So?’ Branden asked her. ‘What will you call him?’
‘Flower’ the daughter answered immediately.
Her mother began to laugh happily.

Chapter Twenty-Two

The Man with Many Answers

They journeyed north to a town called Dilston, reaching their destination within three days. The small group moved swiftly, with Arlen always in the lead and always keeping a distance between himself and both Farrell and Shawn. Even when they rested, be it late at night or for shorter periods in the day, Arlen would sit away from them. He would sit outside the circle of firelight at night, staring up at the moon in silence, naught but a faint shadow to Farrell and Shawn. In the day, he would sit even further away from them, and always with his back to them.

They had travelled with little rest, and when they reached Dilston, all three of them were exhausted from lack of sleep. Arlen, though clearly as tired as Farrell and Shawn, tried hard not to show it.

They entered the town. It was an absolute opposite to the one they had seen before. The town they had left three days ago was dirty, rundown and sad. This town was built with wider streets, allowing rich carriages and merchants selling foreign gifts from their carts to pass easily through. The houses and shops were coloured mostly oranges and yellows and had large open windows. The very air itself felt richer, cleaner. Healthier.

Even the people seemed happier.

'This is one of the richer towns in the kingdom' Arlen explained. 'You won't find beggars here. Only the most fortunate come to live in this town.'

'And this is where we will find the man with all answers?' Farrell asked.

Arlen's lip twitched in a sneer, and he glared back at Farrell, as if feeling insulted that Farrell had spoken to him.

He skulked off without another word.

Farrell and Shawn exchanged a look, Shawn shrugging apologetically.

They followed Arlen through the gentle curving roads. Farrell saw a few of the many wonderful things that were being sold from some of the stalls. Valuable stones and precious metals painstakingly crafted into the most beautiful and delicate jewellery. The most exquisite clothing made of silks and velvets for both men and women. One stall even sold exotic pets. Fabulous birds in cages with the brightest of colours, strange lizards and very skinny, long-headed cats with bright blue eyes; the cats were tied to leads to keep them from wandering.

Farrell's attention drifted to some of the buildings that looked like they may have housed guests and travellers.

'Will we be staying at an inn?'

'No' Arlen shot back. Farrell was surprised he had even spoken to him. 'We will be staying somewhere else.'

They approached a grand building. It was even larger than the home Farrell had left behind, and three stories high.

'What is this place?' Farrell voiced. But Arlen, who had decided he had already shared too many words him with, chose to remain silent.

They stopped before the building, and several finely dressed people approached them.

‘Hello sirs’ one of the men said. He was well spoken, well-mannered and stood with a proud posture. ‘The master has rooms already prepared for you.’
‘W-what?’ Farrell stammered. ‘But how…?’
‘The man with many answers knows many things’ the man, whom Farrell assumed from that point was a servant, replied.
‘Does he have a name?’ Farrell asked dubiously.
‘Many, and none. Please, let us take your horses.’
Farrell hesitated.
‘I'm sure this is not the same town at heart as the one we left’ Shawn reassured him, passing the reins of his horse to one of the servants. ‘I think it’s ok for us to trust them.’
Arlen’s horse was already being led off by the time Farrell passed the reins over. Farrell watched as the exhausted animals were led away.
‘Don’t worry’ Shawn said, noticing Farrell’s uncertain expression. ‘They will be looked after.’
‘How do you know?’ Farrell muttered.
‘Because I trust Arlen’ Shawn replied.
At that point Farrell realised that Arlen had crept away into the building. He shrugged, and walked after him, entering the building, with Shawn walking by his side.
Inside the main doors, they entered into a large courtyard. It was a beautiful and expensive design, like the rest of the building. Huge columns held up the building around them, and above them the bright blue sky was clear; it was as if the town existed in another world. The town they had come from, the thick smoke from the factories had created a permanent cloud around the place, but here, everything was pure and clean.
Farrell glanced around him. Arlen was nowhere to be seen.
Approaching them was a man, wearing a beautifully fitting robe made of materials bearing very intricate patterns and details. He was proud and tall, wearing many fine rings upon his fingers. He walked with purpose.
‘Good day sirs’ the man spoke in a thick accent, coming to stand before them. ‘Danior has been waiting for your arrival.’
‘Danior?’ Farrell asked.
‘The man with many answers’ the figure grinned slyly. ‘The man you came here to find.’
‘Who is he?’ Farrell asked suspiciously. ‘How does he know we were coming?’
‘The man with many answers has many names, and Danior is one of them’ the man answered, without fully answering Farrell’s question. ‘Danior is the name that most men here know him by.’
‘How did he know we were coming?’ Shawn asked.
‘Like I said’ the figure told them happily. ‘He is the man with many answers.’
‘Arlen must have told him’ Farrell said to the man, trying to make sense of the situation. He immediately felt that this was not a man to be trusted. Farrell instantly thought him to be the type of man who was as slippery as a fish, and would stab you in the back at the first opportunity.
If this is what the servant was like, what was the master capable of?

‘Danior has many sources’ the man told them vaguely. ‘He has many little birds here, there and everywhere. There is little that happens that he does not know about, in this kingdom, and in others.’
Farrell’s suspicions instantly grew, and he couldn’t help but glance about him, even looking up to the rooftops in case there hid an assassin.
‘He is very busy at the moment’ the unnamed figure went on. ‘It will be many hours before he is able to see you. In the meantime, let me show you to your rooms.’
Farrell and Shawn walked behind the man as he strode back across the open courtyard. As they went, Farrell took in more of the scenery around them. The courtyard was made of a marble formed into patterns at their feet, coloured pale yellows and faded browns. On the edges of the courtyard were shallow pools were lily pads and flowers floated on the water. In one of the shallow pools in one of the corners of the courtyard, was a fountain spewing water, beside which stood a strange creature Farrell had not seen before. It was a bird of some kind, bright pink in colour, with very long legs, a long neck and a downward pointed beak. *Surely* Farrell thought, *a creature stolen from lands far from here*.
Farrell had only a moment to admire its strange beauty, for it was quickly that he noticed the thin chain that held the bird in place. It was a prisoner here, forced to remain where it stood, in order to please the people that were its captors.
Farrell turned away as they crossed an archway at one end of the courtyard, and entered the building once again.
The inside of the building was just as lavish as the courtyard they had just passed. The entire building it seemed was built to be spacious and beautiful. Farrell and Shawn followed the man up a wide set of stairs set in a corner. They rose to the next level of the building, reaching a long corridor where there were a series of doors lined up on both sides.
‘Here is your room’ the nameless man said going over to one of the doors. He produced a small key from his pocket, unlocking the door and stepping back so that Farrell and Shawn could enter. ‘I think you will find everything to your satisfaction. If not, then please ring the bell inside, and a servant will come. Your every need will be attended to.’
Shawn was the first to enter the room. The first thing he saw when he stepped in was a half-naked woman, lying on her side on one of the beds.
‘Ooohh’ the woman cooed seductively. ‘What a handsome young man.’
She was a dark-skinned beauty, with exotic almond shaped eyes. Clearly, she was born in lands from far away.
‘Sapphire!’ the nameless man barked as Farrell entered the room behind Shawn. ‘You're in the wrong room. It’s the next one down.’
‘Oh’ Sapphire said, instantly dropping her seductive tone and rising from the bed. ‘Excuse me’ she bowed, slipping past them quickly and vanishing.
‘I'm sorry’ the nameless man bowed. ‘She’s new here. Now is there anything else you need?’
‘No’ Farrell said. ‘Thank you.’
The man bowed to them.
‘Danior will send for you when he is ready, in the meantime’ he smiled slyly, ‘make yourself comfortable.’
When he was gone, Shawn turned to the room, admiring everything around him.
‘Look at this place’ Shawn said in awe. ‘Can you imagine owning such wealth?’

Farrell closed the door behind him, facing the room.
It was a small room, but like everything they have seen so far, it was lavish and beautiful. There were two single beds, positioned against opposite walls and enveloped in rich velvet colours with large cushions. Shawn immediately collapsed on one of the beds, stretching cat-like before folding his arms behind his head.
'I could get used to this.'
'This isn't a holiday' Farrell replied, leaning against the wall and crossing his arms.
'I know that' Shawn replied, his tone becoming serious.
'Where do you think Arlen went?'
'I don't know. But I'm sure he can take care of himself.'
Farrell glanced towards Shawn, he opened his mouth as if to say something, but then changed his mind. He closed his mouth again and turned away.
'You may as well sit down' Shawn told him. 'We'll probably be here a while.'
Farrell pushed himself off the wall, wandering over to the empty bed and sitting heavily on it. His bones felt like lead, his muscles sore. After so many years of being inactive, residing in the small town he had lived for so long, travelling so far and having so much happening in only a few short days had taken its toll on him. He felt weary, both physically and mentally drained.
Farrell ran his fingers through his hair, sighing deeply.
'Are you ok?' Shawn asked him.
'Yeah.'
'Good.'
Farrell glanced over at Shawn.
'How have you been keeping these last few years?'
'You're asking me this now?' Shawn rolled onto his side. 'Do you really want to know?'
'Why wouldn't I?'
'Well' Shawn replied. 'You've hardly spoken to me or my family since my father died.'
As Shawn continued to speak, Farrell's mood began to sink.
'I know it was hard for you' Shawn went on, 'but Arlen didn't give into grief.'
Farrell fell silent. He jerked his head away in annoyance; then looked back at Shawn.
'How is Gracie doing? I hear she's recently married.'
'She is' Shawn replied, allowing the subject to be changed. 'Her husband is a merchant, a wealthy one at that. I hear they're doing quite well together. She lives far away now, but visits us often.'
Farrell felt his heart dampen as he thought of his own daughter, and he struggled to fight against the wave of despair and misery that threatened to engulf him as he thought of the seemingly impossible task he was faced with. Searching for someone who was a child when they were taken over ten years ago, she would have changed drastically over that time. She would surely be unrecognisable from the little girl he had known. The little girl who used to run up and down the stairs, playing with that silly little bird whose name he had long since forgotten. And then a thought struck him that cut into his heart.
What if she doesn't recognise me?
How could he possibly succeed in his task?

‘How old is Gracie now?’ Farrell continued, speaking to Shawn and forcing his negative thoughts down.
‘She’s twenty.’
They talked, catching up on all that had happened to them over the years in what little time they had. They spoke of many things, and it didn’t feel like too long afterwards, that there came a knock on their door. A figure entered, it was the same man as before, the one Farrell didn’t trust.
He bowed his head to them, smiling shrewdly.
‘Danior will see you now.’

The room they entered was ostentatious. It was small, though just like the rest of the rooms they had seen, no expense had been spared on it. Farrell and Shawn sat on the two seats placed before the desk at the back of the room. By the doorway stood a guard, unnecessarily heavily armoured, he stepped back as a figure entered the room, and sat in the large seat behind the desk. It was Danior, the man they had waited to see. Lean and muscular, he dressed flamboyantly but modestly, with long sleeves and gloves which covered his hands. Farrell noticed light scarring around his face, similar to the scars he had seen worn by soldiers and veterans. He looked to be in his sixties, but had aged well. He was handsome, with black hair slicked back and a pointed beard.
‘So’ the wise man began leaning forward, ‘what would you like me to help you with?’
‘I am looking for someone’ Farrell began hastily. ‘We both are’ he added, glancing briefly at Shawn beside him.
‘Who is this person?’
‘A girl’ Farrell replied.
Danior lifted a quill and began to scribble some notes on a page before him. ‘Do you know where she is?’ he asked.
‘No.’
‘Where was she last seen?’
‘I don’t know.’
Danior hesitated. ‘What does she look like?’
‘I don’t know’ Farrell replied.
Danior looked Farrell in the eyes, brow coming down in mild annoyance as he lowered his quill.
‘When did she go missing?’
‘Twelve years ago.’
‘And you're only just now looking for her?’ Danior spoke politely.
Farrell could think of no answer that was good enough to give. Danior groaned, sighing into his hand.
‘Let me get this straight’ he said leaning forward after a time. ‘You haven’t seen her in twelve years, you have no idea what she looks like, where she is, if she is even still in this country, and by the sound of it you don’t even know if she’s alive, and you wish to find this person. Is that correct?’
‘It is’ Farrell replied uncertainly.
‘Let me ask you a question. Do you know *anything* about her?’

‘Her name’ Farrell said. ‘It’s Amaia…. she’s my daughter.’
‘The girl with two fathers’ Danior replied immediately.
‘What?’
‘Tell me’ Danior said briskly, pushing his quill and paper to the side and rising from his chair. ‘Why are you wasting my time like this?’
‘Wait!’ Farrell called after him as the man walked around his desk and began to stride away.
‘He hasn’t told you has he?’ Danior shot turning back to him. ‘Arlen. He already knows where Amaia is. He has done for years.’
The silence the wise man left Farrell in was one of utter shock.
Later that evening, Farrell entered Arlen’s room.

Chapter Twenty-Three
The Tired Men

‘Why didn’t you tell me?’
Arlen’s shoulders tensed. He placed his hands slowly down upon the table he sat at, fingers splayed. He rose slowly.
‘Why didn’t you tell me?’ Farrell repeated. ‘Why didn’t you tell me you already knew where she was?’
‘Because it was none of your concern’ Arlen spoke slowly to the wall.
‘None of my concern?’ Farrell repeated. His blood began to rise. He balled his fists. ‘She is my daughter.’
‘Is she?’
Arlen turned to face him. His expression was dark. His eyes full of hatred.
‘I spent one last night with Ramana, the night before you married her, and exactly nine months later she has a child.’
The corner of Farrell’s eye twitched.
‘Did you make love to her on the night you were married?’ Arlen asked his brother.
‘Yes.’
‘Then either one of us could be Amaia’s father.’
Farrell had suspected as much. The possibility had always been obvious to him, resting at the back of his mind. He had known Ramana had loved Arlen before she had loved him, and he had suspected Arlen might be the father based on how he behaved, the way he always watched from a distance as Amaia grew. He had always known, but to have the fact spoken so openly……it felt almost like a betrayal.
‘She is my daughter’ Farrell said harshly. ‘I cared for her……raised her.’
‘You failed her.’
‘I did everything I could!’
‘No’ Arlen said shortly. ‘You didn’t.’
‘Well if you know already where she is, why haven’t you found her already?’

Arlen's eyes flashed.
He punched Farrell hard right in the face. Farrell fell back, caught by surprise.
Arlen grabbed Farrell by the shirt, shaking him and snarling like a wild beast.
'You think if I could save her I would have done so by now?' he growled. 'You think I've just been wasting all these years? While you drank and let your life fall to ruins all around you, simply *assuming* she was dead…. I never stopped looking…. not in twelve years!' he drew a long cruel knife from his belt, raising it above his head with the point facing his brother. '*NOT IN TWELVE YEARS DID I STOP!'*
Farrell saw the flash of steel, blocking the attack just in time. His arm shook as he struggled to push back the blade. He drew his head back, head butting Arlen hard. Arlen stumbled back, holding his bleeding nose. Farrell grabbed the nearest thing at hand which happened to be a chair, swinging it as hard as he could towards Arlen, and knocking him off balance.
Arlen dropped the knife.
Farrell threw a punch towards Arlen, but Arlen caught his fist. In one quick move Arlen threw Farrell to the floor, kneeling beside him and cracking his arm over his knees. Farrell screamed in pain as his arm snapped. He grabbed onto Arlen, stopping his fist in the air as he made to hit him again.
Farrell's cries however had drawn attention, and seconds later, Shawn burst into the room.
'Arlen!' he called out in shock, grabbing him and pulling him off Farrell.
But Arlen was stronger than him, and Shawn could not hold him back for long.
Farrell crawled away from his brother, using the distraction that Shawn had given him; he rose to his feet, facing Arlen again. Arlen had managed to break free of Shawn's hold, and Shawn had quickly vanished, back through the door to get help.
Farrell charged forwards, lunging for the knife Arlen had dropped. But before Farrell could grab the knife, Arlen had reached for the nearest thing at hand, a medium sized statue of the goddess Ludus, made of solid stone. Arlen swung the statue, hitting Farrell hard across the head. Farrell was knocked to the side. He fell, dazed as his mind wavered, he fought to stay conscious, suddenly unaware of anything around him as the pain in his head blinded him to all else.
He felt his shoulder being jerked as he was rolled onto his back.
Arlen knelt over him, sitting on his chest and breathing fast, his chest rising and falling quickly from pure rage and hatred as he stared down at Farrell.
He gritted his teeth, raising shaking hands towards Farrell.
He grabbed his throat, and began to squeeze.
Farrell's eyes widened as he realised what his brother was doing.
Arlen tightened his grip further, his wild eyes wide and crazed as he stared unmoved down at his brother as he began to struggle. Arlen felt nothing inside him as he watched his brother's life slipping away, nothing, but determination.
Farrell fought hard to stay alive. He grabbed his brother's hands, trying to free them from his throat, and ignoring the burning agony shooting though his broken arm. Farrell thought he was going to die, he was sure of it. But then suddenly Arlen was being pulled back off him. Neither brother had noticed the door slamming open again and the bodies pouring in, so fixed was each on the other.

Arlen fought against the hands that pulled him back, calling out in defiance as the many soldiers pulled him away from Farrell, as Farrell immediately rolled onto his side, coughing and gasping violently.
'THIS ISN'T THE END!' Arlen screamed at him. 'I *WILL* KILL YOU! AND NEXT TIME YOU'LL *STAY* DEAD!'
Farrell glanced up at him. Their eyes met for the briefest of moments as Arlen was dragged from the room by the men, and for the briefest of moments, Farrell saw the devil himself in his eyes. It was pure loathing. Hate had destroyed his brother, had created him into this monster. The man, who had once risked his life for him, now wanted him dead.
It frightened him.
It frightened him to see Arlen so different, so corrupt……so full of hatred.
Arlen… Farrell thought to himself as men began to mill around him. *You died that day. That day I lost Ramana and Amaia……I lost you too.*
Shawn was on his knees beside him, shaking him and speaking to him, but Farrell heard none of his words.
His slumped, allowing his body to relax as he slipped into unconsciousness, a sleep so deep, that nothing could bother him.
He woke sometime later in an unfamiliar room. Turning his head to the side gingerly, then to the other side, he saw that he was alone in this place.

It was many hours before Farrell received visitors of any kind. First there was a woman. She introduced herself as a healer, checked on his injuries and his broken arm, which had now been put in a splint, and quickly left. It was a considerable time after that which Shawn appeared.
'Where have you been?' Farrell asked him as he took a seat beside Farrell's bed.
'I've been talking to Arlen' Shawn replied uncomfortably. 'He's still…angry.'
Farrell turned his head away.
'What happened?' Shawn asked Farrell. 'Why were you two fighting?'
Farrell looked back at Shawn.
'I'm not sure' he replied. 'I…I think I said something…'
'What did you say?'
'I…' Farrell began, struggling to cast his mind back. 'I can't remember.'
Shawn let out a deep sigh, leaning back in his chair.
'What's going on?' Farrell asked Shawn. 'Why were you gone for so long?'
'I was talking to Arlen' Shawn repeated. 'He was…' he broke off, falling silent for a moment. 'It took me a long while to convince him not to leave. He says he knows where Amaia is, and that he doesn't need your help to find her.'
Farrell's heart sank as he heard the words, listening to Shawn as he continued to talk.
'I managed to convince him to stay. At the moment he's gone away. But he will be back.'
'Where's he gone?'
'He said he's hiring mercenaries.'
'Mercenaries?' Farrell repeated. 'For what?'

Shawn shrugged.
‘Shawn…. did Arlen tell you where he thinks Amaia is?’
Shawn hesitated, before answering. ‘I…he did.’
‘Then where is she? And why if he knows where she is hasn’t he already got her?’
Shawn shook his head. ‘I don’t…I mean I trust him but…...it just seems so farfetched….’
‘What did he say?’ Farrell pressed, unable to keep his voice from rising. ‘Where is Amaia?’
‘He says….’ Shawn began; ‘he says she is in a safe place…that she…...’ he went silent again.
‘Who has her?’ Farrell urged. ‘Please tell me.’
‘He says’ Shawn went on, ‘that she is being held captive by a member of the royal family.’
‘The king?’ Farrell asked incredulous. ‘But…how?’
‘Not the king’ Shawn corrected, ‘but one of his sons.’
‘A prince?’
‘Hmm’ Shawn frowned thoughtfully, before shaking his head. ‘I don’t know. I mean I trust Arlen…. but…. I don’t know. Maybe he’s mistaken.’ He shook his head again. ‘This makes no sense, how can one of the princes have Amaia, and why?’
‘What possible reason could one of the princes have to kidnap my daughter?’
‘I don’t know’ Shawn shrugged. ‘Assuming it was really is a prince who is responsible.’
‘Do you believe it?’
Shawn shrugged again. ‘It seems unlikely. But I trust Arlen, and until I find out otherwise, then I will believe he is telling the truth.’
‘Then so will I’ Farrell added. ‘I've never known Arlen to tell a lie.’
Shawn rose from his seat.
‘Where are you going?’ Farrell called after him.
‘To see if I can find Arlen again’ Shawn replied, pausing with his hand on the doorframe. ‘I need to convince him to let both of us accompany him in his search. He wants to leave you here.’
And with that, Shawn left, and Farrell remained where he was, feeling more alone and helpless than ever.

The next day, Farrell left the healers, his broken arm bound in a cast. He had questioned the young man who had tended him how long it would take to fully heal. His answer was not satisfactory.
‘The men are waiting for you in the meeting room’ the healer had told him.
‘The men?’
‘Gathered by Arlen’ the healer explained. ‘You are bound to set off on your journey soon.’
Farrell strode down the corridor, opening the double doors at the end. They were made of dark wood and painted gold in decorative patterns. The room inside was large and well lit. Farrell spotted Shawn sitting at the oval table in the middle of the otherwise empty room, around him were seated many other men, older and shady looking characters. Farrell guessed them to be the mercenaries.
‘What is this?’ Farrell asked.
‘Come sit’ Shawn invited. ‘We were just about to begin our talks.’
‘What talks?’ Farrell asked taking the only remaining seat beside Shawn.

‘Our plans’ Shawn replied, ‘of getting Amaia back.’
Farrell glanced around the room. ‘Where’s Arlen?’
‘He’s left already.
‘Left?’
‘He’s travelling to our destination. He said he would wait for us there. He wanted to leave as soon as possible.’
Farrell felt strangely saddened by this.
‘These men’ Shawn explained, answering the next question Farrell was sure to ask. ‘They were hired by Arlen to help us with our task.’
Farrell cast his eyes at the people around him, there were about twenty in total. Many of them were thickset and battle scarred, one was missing an eye, but hadn’t bothered with an eye patch, another had a large mask that covered half his face, as if hiding a terrible wound.
‘Cheery bunch’ Farrell murmured under his breath. ‘So, what’s the plan?’ he asked in a louder voice to Shawn.
‘We fight’ growled one of the mercenaries, banging his fist on the table.
Farrell waited for the man to elaborate, but he didn’t.
Shawn beside him cleared his throat.
‘Our destination is far from here, we will travel there swiftly. The horses are ready to go immediately.’
‘And where do we go?’ Farrell asked Shawn.
‘The place doesn’t exactly have a name. Its east of here, I can’t really describe it. Arlen showed me on the map where it is. I can take us there, I can lead the way.’
‘And what will we do when we get there?’ Farrell went on.
‘Arlen believes the prince has built a special place in order to conceal Amaia’ one of the nameless mercenaries spoke. ‘He believes she has been imprisoned at this place for a long while now, since she was taken.’
‘Has he been there before?’ Farrell said to the mercenary.
‘Arlen tells us he has been there many times. He has watched the place, scouted it. He knows the layout well he has told us, he knows where to attack, and where the guards are.’
‘Guards?’
‘The place is well guarded’ another mercenary said. ‘Day and night, around the clock.’
‘For Amaia? But…. why?’
‘We don’t know’ Shawn interrupted. ‘But think of it this way, if the prince is going through so much trouble to protect her, well…’ he shrugged. ‘She must be well cared for.’
‘But why would he care so much for her?’ Farrell asked Shawn.
‘Who knows?’ he shrugged again.
‘The plan is’ the same mercenary spoke again to Farrell, ‘we surround the place, wait for Arlen’s command, then attack.’
‘Why is there need to fight?’
‘You’ve already been told’ the mercenary replied shortly. ‘The place is guarded.’
‘And you believe these guards will fight back?’
‘They won’t have much of a choice’ the mercenary smirked.
‘There won’t be much of a fight’ another mercenary answered. ‘We will move swiftly, and eliminate all threats quickly. That is our job. Once it is over, we will look for the next one.’

‘So, you will stick with us as long as you get paid?’ Farrell droned.
‘We’re only being paid very little.’
‘Really?’ Farrell asked. ‘Then why are you helping us?’
‘We’re bored’ said another mercenary.
Farrell thought suddenly how he would struggle to tell these men apart.
‘Bored?’ he said.
‘Life’ the mercenary said taking out a pipe, ‘has become…’ he sighed. ‘…*so boring*…’
‘Why aren’t you in the king’s army?’ Farrell asked.
‘We’re too old to be accepted by him any more’ the mercenary replied as he lit his pipe. ‘You should know that.’
‘So, you look for jobs where you can?’
‘Whenever we can’ the mercenary’s eyes glinted at Farrell as he spoke. ‘Don’t worry. We know battle; we’ve all done many missions, of many different kinds. If your daughter is in that building’ he said lifting the pipe to his lips, ‘we will get her back.’
‘And if she’s not?’
‘Then we will follow you until you do.’
‘And then find the next job’ the man beside Farrell spoke up. ‘Life has become….so boring.’
‘So when do we leave?’ Farrell asked.
‘When you feel like it’ came the answer.
‘Now?’
The mercenary he spoke to nodded. ‘Now’ he repeated.
The figures in the room rose and began to file out.
‘How’s your arm?’ Shawn whispered to Farrell discreetly, hanging back.
‘Fine’ Farrell replied sulkily, ‘but it will take a while to heal I'm afraid.’
Shawn nodded. ‘Come on’ he said to Farrell. ‘We’d better get going.’
It was not only Amaia that Farrell thought of as he left the room with the others, it was Arlen also. Where was he now? And how much did he really know?

Chapter Twenty-Four
The Writing on the Plaque

The band of men left Dilston quickly; each mercenary carried their own supplies on their own horses, tall and muscular beasts they were, bred for battle. Many like their riders bore scars and other minor injuries on their bodies.
Five days they travelled. The landscape for the most part was relatively flat and their journey uneventful. Over that time Farrell was becoming familiar with some of the mercenaries, and their names and habits and who knew who and what each was like. He wouldn’t speak to them, only watched them. Shawn the Farrell would spend most of their time together along the journey, riding side by side in silence. Farrell was just getting used to riding his grey mare, when they arrived at their destination.

The last few hours of their journey took them through woodland, and once they reached the other side, they found Arlen waiting for them.
‘Good, you're all finally here’ he said rising to his feet.
He had made a small camp in the woods where he and his horse waited, a small area tucked away and well hidden.
Farrell dismounted his horse, eager to find the place where Amaia was supposed to be, but he waited patiently for Arlen to speak.
‘There is a building’ Arlen began as the others began to dismount, ‘just behind me. A large manor surrounded by walls and gates and guarded by soldiers, but not too many to be impassable. If we catch them by surprise then we stand a good chance of succeeding.’
‘Have you seen her?’ Farrell stepped forward, unable to keep silent any longer. ‘Have you seen Amaia?’
Arlen gave him a cold expression.
‘Yes’ he said quietly. ‘I have seen her.’
‘Is she alright?’
Arlen’s body tense began to quiver slightly as he spoke to Farrell, turning quickly away the instant he had finished his sentence. ‘She is alive and well as far as I can see but I've only seen distant glimpses of her.’ Arlen addressed the others now. ‘If the rest of you would like to follow me, I will show you the manor.’
When they reached the edge of the forest, the manor came into sight. Farrell was surprised by what he saw. It was indeed a large building as Arlen had said, with large windows, and behind the tall metal fences its grounds were beautiful. The gardens were overflowing with flowers and fruit trees that waved their branches in the wind. Squinting, Farrell could see a woman kneeling amongst the flowers, and his heart skipped a beat, thinking that it might be her. But no, this lady was much older than Amaia would be, and she had short blonde hair.
‘To be honest I think I would have been surprised no matter what we found’ Farrell told Shawn beside him a short while later. ‘I really had no idea what I was expecting.’
‘Me neither’ Shawn said. He considered the place before him. ‘But I think this is better than anything I could have expected’ he went on. ‘Like I said’ he turned to Farrell, ‘the prince must have gone through a lot of trouble for her. I'm sure she’s been well cared for.’
Farrell stared hard at the building, deep in thought.
Could Amaia really be in there, after all this time, just a short distance away?
‘Amaia’ Farrell spoke out loud, gripping the hilt of his sword. ‘*Please* be in there.’
Nearby Arlen was talking animatedly to the mercenaries just out of earshot, Farrell could not hear what he said as he spoke so fast.
When Arlen was finished many of the mercenaries began to disperse, Farrell watched them moving away; they kept within the shadow of the trees and out of sight. Several mercenaries stayed behind, these were all the archers.
‘What would you like us to do?’ Shawn asked Arlen.
Arlen glanced towards Farrell with a sneer on his lips, looking to his broken arm that rested in a sling, before speaking to Shawn again. Farrell could imagine that Arlen thought him unworthy to fight, perhaps out of practice after all these years, as well as being injured.
Perhaps he was right.

‘In exactly twelve minutes the guards will change over’ Arlen said to Shawn. ‘They will ride this way through the woods. We kill them and take their horses. Then we ride to the front gates wearing their armour. The guards usually wear helmets so we can cover our faces. We might raise a little suspicion by riding back’ Arlen admitted, ‘but if we can get close enough to eliminate those at the front gate, then we can let ourselves and some of the others in’ he said. ‘The remaining mercenaries will circle around and scale the wall at the back of the house. There is a garden; they can make their own way in from there. I've explained the layout of the building as best I can.’
‘Are they trustworthy?’ Shawn asked him.
Arlen hesitated.
‘I hope so’ he finally answered.

The three waited in silence in the woods, hidden by the trees and completely invisible to anyone approaching them from the manor.
Farrell waited expectantly, and as Arlen had estimated, in twelve minutes time, the gates to the manor opened and several mounted figures rode their way.
Farrell tensed, hand sliding to the hilt of his sword. He glanced around him, seeing some of the mercenaries hiding in the trees above them, arrows nocked.
They waited in tense silence as the soldiers drew closer, unknowingly riding to their end.
The soldiers entered the forest, riding at a gentle trot, above them the mercenaries all aimed at their targets. Arlen, Shawn and Farrell waiting on the ground behind the trees watched as the soldiers rode past them. And then Arlen whistled loudly.
The soldiers barely had time to turn in confusion at the source of the noise when the mercenaries above fired their arrows, killing almost all of them in one hit. The remaining were picked off by the archers as they tried to escape, but not getting very far. Arlen, Shawn and Farrell strode from their hiding places, checking the fallen men and finishing off those few that were still alive.
Farrell turned one of the men over, seeing the terror in him, knowing it was the end. He tried to beg for his life, but Farrell quickly slit his throat, straightening up again and turning back to Arlen.
‘Take their armour’ Arlen said already beginning to undress one of the dead men as Shawn tried to calm and restrain some of the horses as they pranced and wandered about in confusion.
The other horses were quickly caught by the mercenaries who descended from the trees, undressing the dead men and putting on their armour.
Farrell placed the helmet over his head, mounting one of the horses and wheeling the animal around. It felt good to be riding a war horse again he thought.
Nearby, Arlen surveyed the scene briefly before calling out the order to ride forth, leaving the dead men where they had fallen, they left the forest, riding out into the open and towards the manor.
When they reached the gates, Arlen dismounted his horse quickly, talking in a murmur to the young soldier who guarded the gates. The instant the gates were opened by the young soldier, Arlen drove a knife deep into his throat.

The others dismounted their horses, throwing off their helmets so they may be recognised by the other mercenaries that attacked the manor from the back, sweeping through the garden and into the building.
The slaughter was quick. Any soldier that was not their own had been killed, now only the terrified servants remained. Poor unfortunate souls. They cowered in fear and cried, holding each other for comfort and reassurance, gazing up in horror at the brawny mercenaries that surrounded them with their huge axes and swords.
Arlen strode through the many rooms, never pausing in his furious strides, still holding his bloodied sword in his hand. He reached a room where there were no other doors beside the one he had entered through. A dead end. He turned and marched back out to the corridor, shouting in frustration, nerves still on edge from the fight and pumped full of adrenaline.
'WHERE IS SHE?!'
Farrell watched his brother's pacing, standing beside Shawn and some of the mercenaries that guarded the servants. The other mercenaries were searching the rooms, thinking perhaps that the young woman they sought was hiding. She had good reason to fear them after all.
'I'm going to look too' Shawn said leaving his side.
Farrell could hear the stress in his voice as he spoke.
Farrell walked away shortly after, heading out of the building, thinking to himself.
Is she really here? Was she ever here? Perhaps Arlen was wrong after all, if she were here, they would have found her by now.
He wandered out of the rooms, down a set of stairs and stepped out into the garden.
Farrell lifted his face to the sky, tilting his head back and feeling the sun's rays warming his cheeks.
He stepped forwards.
The garden was vast, far larger than any he had seen before, with many growing things and many hidden places.
Farrell walked for what seemed like ages, turning this corner and that. There were many beautiful statues here, and the garden had been well looked after. But he didn't notice the pretty pink flowers that grew from the trees, nor the pond built within stone where a miniature river constantly ran water into it. But he did notice one thing that seemed strangely out of place.
A sort of plaque set in the ground a short distance away. Farrell altered his course, walking towards it, coming to a stop before it and reading.
His mind slowed.
He re-read the writing on the plaque again, and his heart stopped.
He turned and ran, back towards the building he had come from, tearing up the stairs to where the others were.
'ARLEN!' he cried. 'Where is Arlen?'
'I'm here' Arlen replied running into the room from the next. He slowed to a stop, eyes wide at the look of shock on Farrell's face. 'What is it?' he asked nervously.
'The garden' Farrell gasped, out of breath.
Arlen waited for no more explanation. He rushed past his brother, followed closely by Shawn and some of the other mercenaries.
He ran through the garden, searching feverishly for whatever it was that Farrell had found.

‘Damit what is it?’ Arlen cried in frustration.
‘Here!’ Shawn called, kneeling by something.
Arlen jogged over to him.
His heart instantly plummeted to his feet, body utterly frozen.
He read the plaque again.

Here lies Amaia
Died aged nineteen
A black-haired beauty
You will always be remembered

‘Nineteen’ Shawn spoke. ‘That’s how old she would have been. Black haired…… it must be her.’
Arlen turned on his heel.
He walked away.

Arlen stood at the balcony of one of the highest towers, staring out into nothingness.
Inside he felt numb. Felt dead.
Arlen remembered the words he had spoken to his brother. Not that long ago.
Ludus can go fuck herself! I am not the brother you once knew. I don’t pray anymore.
‘I've brought this on myself’ he spoke weakly as he climbed onto the balcony’s wall.
It was windy at the top of the tower, and Arlen balanced precariously as he made his careful way forwards along the long wall of rock that jutted out of the tower, like a great spike. At its end, there was nothing but a long drop.
Arlen reached the end of the path, balanced he held his position; half crouched against the uneasy breeze that threatened to topple him off the wall.
Arlen tilted his head down.
It was a very long drop. Below him was the garden, and soft earth. But it wouldn’t matter at this height. Whether he landed on the grassy blanket of the garden or on solid stone, at this height, it wouldn’t make a difference in the end.
At this height, nothing would survive.
Arlen stared down, thinking of how fast he would fall, and what it would feel like. He found he didn’t care.
‘Ramana’ he whispered to himself. ‘Amaia…I will see you again.’
But he didn’t move. Not yet. His life was over, he knew this, but he wanted to make the most of what little there was left for him.
The feel of the wind. The touch of the stone below him. The sight of everything in the world that was left for him to see.
Arlen took a deep breath. He blinked slowly.
His heart began to race, as he realised that he was truly about to do this.

He took another deep breath. And leant forward ever so slightly.
'Arlen!'
He wheeled around suddenly, moving dangerously fast on the thin ledge that he was balanced on.
Shawn stood before him on the balcony a short distance away. Shock and disbelief were written all over him. He held his arms out reassuringly, as if facing a startled deer.
'What are you doing?'
Arlen immediately whipped a knife from his belt, bringing it to his throat.
'You can't stop me!' he cried. 'I have made my choice.'
'Why are you doing this?!'
'Because!' Arlen shouted back. He gritted his teeth, beginning to shake, tears brimmed in his eyes and running down his cheeks. 'I've lost the only things in life I truly cared about! First Ramana…and now Amaia……there's no reason for me to live anymore!'
'What about the things in life you enjoyed before them? What about all the things you love to do, the people you still care about, who care about you? What about me and my family? What about your brother?!'
'My brother…' Arlen hissed shaking his head as hatred filling his heart. 'Farrell…'
'Still loves you' Shawn called to him. 'Please!' he reached a hand out to him. 'Come here! I will help you.'
'No!' Arlen called back. 'There is nothing you can do to change anything now. Amaia is dead. We're too late. I will meet them again in the afterlife.'
'Arlen…' Shawn sobbed, beginning to panic now. 'Please don't do this…there are still good things to live for. You still have a future.'
'What future is there without Ramana? Without Amaia…. what if……. what if…' he began, speaking in a whisper. 'What if she *is* my daughter…?'
'You must have faith!' Shawn called back. 'Faith in the gods. Faith that life will get better. Faith in possibility!'
'I have no faith. Not anymore.' Arlen half-turned away. 'The gods have failed me, and I have failed the only two people I cared for most in this world.'
Shawn stared at Arlen, watching helplessly as he spoke.
'It's all my fault I suppose' Arlen went on. 'If I hadn't cursed the gods…...they wouldn't have done this. They wouldn't be punishing me.'
'So you haven't lost all of your faith' Shawn challenged.
Arlen turned his dark eyes onto Shawn.
He smirked then.
'Very clever' Arlen shrugged. 'You caught me out.'
Arlen turned back to the fall.
'Wait!' Shawn called out desperately.
'You'd better have a good reason to change my mind.'
'How do you know that…?' Shawn fumbled, unsure of what to say. 'How do you know it's really her grave?'
'A black-haired beauty. Eighteen years in age. That's how old she would have been. You said so yourself.'

‘I spoke too soon’ Shawn hurried. ‘You don’t even know she’s buried there. You said it yourself, you said you saw her with your own eyes wandering the manor. From a distance yes, but don’t you want to know what really happened here!’
Arlen half-turned back to Shawn.
‘It may not have been Amaia that I saw walking the corridors’ Arlen said. ‘Now, I think that she mostly likely has been dead long before we came here today.’
‘How do you know?’ Shawn told him. ‘You don’t *know* if it’s really her grave. You don’t *know* if she’s really buried there.’
In truth he didn’t realise what he was saying any more. So desperate was he to save Arlen., he would say anything at this point.
‘She might not even be buried there’ Shawn insisted. ‘You still have no idea why the prince took her. Anything could have happened in all those years. This whole thing is a mystery. She might still be alive!’
Arlen turned fully to Shawn now, facing him head on. The wind blew dangerous around him, making him wobble slightly where he stood.
‘But that wouldn’t make any sense.’
‘None of this makes sense’ Shawn argued. ‘And if there’s a possibility at she still lives and breathes…. would you accept it, no matter how small the chance?’
‘Yes’ Arlen breathed. ‘I would.’
He sheathed the knife.
‘I’ll go back down to the garden’ Shawn told him hastily. ‘I’ll dig up the grave, and if she’s not there……will you come down?’
‘Yes’ Arlen said with surety. ‘But in the meantime, I'm staying here.’
Shawn wheeled around, tearing back down the stairs, running as fast as he could towards the garden.

He found Farrell kneeling before the grave, completely ignoring him; he fell before it, desperately pulling the earth up with his bare hands.
‘What are you doing?!’ Farrell asked incredulous.
‘No time to explain’ Shawn gasped in his haste, thinking about Arlen dangling precariously high above them. ‘Just help me dig!’
Farrell obeyed, listening only because of the urgency in Shawn’s voice and not questioning him further.
They dug through the dirt as fast as they could, pulling at the soil and digging deep.
After a short time, the two drew back.
‘How can this be?’ Farrell whispered. ‘There’s nothing here?’
‘I have to tell Arlen’ Shawn huffed, rising to his feet.
‘Wait!’ Farrell called out, running after him.
Farrell dashed after Shawn, following him up the stairs of the tower.
He faltered uncertainly at the sight of his brother, standing far out away from the balcony, hanging dangerously over the drop that was below him, with nothing but his balance to protect him.
‘Arlen!’ Shawn panted. ‘The grave. It’s empty!’
Arlen’s eyes flashed. His attention drifted towards Farrell for reassurance.

‘It’s true’ Farrell breathed. ‘It’s completely empty. She’s not there.’
‘But why…’ Arlen murmured, ‘why would it be there?’
‘Arlen?’ Shawn spoke tentatively, leaning forwards over the wall with his hand extended, earth and dirt was ground into his skin and clung beneath his nails. ‘Come down.’

Arlen stepped carefully forwards along the wall towards Shawn, moving slowly as he went. He took his hand, and Shawn helped him back down onto the balcony and to safe ground.
Shawn embraced Arlen then, letting out the breath he had been holding.
‘Thank the gods’ he sighed in relief. ‘I'm so glad you didn’t…...’
‘This is just the beginning then’ Arlen said, straightening up again, ‘the beginning of our search to find Amaia. I thought I had her…I was so sure……’
‘She is alive’ Shawn told him. ‘I feel it in my heart.’
‘I feel something too’ Arlen said. ‘I only wish that I am not wrong.’
His attention drifted towards Farrell then. His expression darkened.
‘Come’ he mumbled to Shawn, arm still around his shoulders.
The two walked away, leaving Farrell alone.

Farrell stood on the balcony, hands resting against the cool stone of the wall before him.
The day was dying. The world that stretched far around him was going to sleep. He thought of his task then, the task of finding his daughter.
‘Amaia’ he whispered her name on the wind. ‘*Where are you?*’
The vastness of the world lay out like a great map before his eyes. From the tall tower he could see far into the horizon. Great plains before him, mountains behind, rivers and towns and within it all….
There were so many places. So many places she might be. So many places she could be hiding.
‘Where are you Amaia?’ he said again.
His question fell on the deaf ears of the world.
‘I will never stop looking for you. For as long as it takes, I will search. To the day I die.’

Chapter Twenty-Five
Strange Tales

‘So, what do we do now?’ Farrell asked, scratching at his healing arm in the splint, furious he couldn’t get that itch.
Shawn glanced from Arlen to Farrell.
‘I know’ Arlen spoke in a strange voice. ‘Let’s ask the residents.’

He strode towards the group of huddled servants, still cowering behind the wall of mercenaries that guarded them. Grabbing one of them, a young woman, Arlen pulled her from the crowd and dragged her out into the open. The poor woman screamed and sobbed and begged for her life.
Arlen threw her to the ground away from the others, but still in sight of them. The servant kneeled before him, cowering in fear.
At first Arlen didn't do anything. And then he lifted his hand, hitting her hard across the face.
Shawn and Farrell straightened, muscles growing tense, startled by Arlen's treatment, and wondering what he would do next. The mercenaries remained unmoved.
The woman screamed again, Arlen grabbed her, shaking her roughly to silence her.
'It's ok' Arlen said soothingly when she had stopped screaming. 'Everything is going to be ok.'
The woman looked more terrified than ever.
Arlen knelt before her, still holding her tightly by the shoulder, and digging his nails deep into her skin. He came to her eyelevel.
'What is your name?'
'Sss…Sarah…' the girl trembled.
'Good' Arlen nodded. 'Now. What can you tell me about the young woman who lived here?'
'She…' Sarah begun. She faltered, as if unsure where to begin.
'Go on' Arlen said encouragingly.
'She lived here.'
'What was her name?'
'Amaia.'
Arlen let out a deep breath at the sound of her name. His grip tightened further on the woman's shoulder and she flinched, but dared not resist.
'Did you….' Arlen went on, 'speak to her?'
'No' Sarah shook her head. 'We were not allowed to.'
'On whose command?'
'The prince'.'
'Hmmm' Arlen murmured. 'Where is she now?'
'I don't know.'
'Why was she hidden here?'
'I don't know.'
Arlen was about to ask another question, but changed his mind. Instead he asked a different one.
'Why…where you not allowed to speak to her?'
'Because it was the order the prince gave to all of us' the servant replied in a quiet voice.
'How long has she been here?' Arlen asked.
'About…' Sarah thought. 'Maybe about twelve years. She was only a child when she was brought here, about seven in age maybe.'
'She was seven when she was first taken' Farrell spoke up.
Oh gods Arlen realised. *She's been here all that time? Completely alone…with no one to talk to……all that time…*

A deep sorrow filled his heart. A great depression, as he realised how lonely she must have been.
'And you've been working here all that time?' Arlen asked the servant.
'Yes' Sarah replied. 'I watched her grow. But none of us were allowed to speak to her. She was well cared for, she had everything we could have given her…. but….'
Arlen let her go, and Sarah fell back, massaging her aching shoulders with relief.
'And…' Arlen repeated. 'You don't know where she is?'
'No' Sarah shook her head. 'She just…vanished one day.'
Arlen raised his head.
What the hell is going on?
'Is there…anything else you can tell me? About the Amaia? Anything at all?'
'There is…one thing' Sarah spoke carefully.
Everyone in the room raised their heads slightly, ears perked with interest. Arlen faced the servant head on now, behind him Farrell had tensed.
'What is it?' Arlen asked her.
'I…. I don't know. This won't make sense…but…'
Sarah looked up at him.
'I was…bringing tea to her room. It was a sunny day, and…she was never allowed outside, only stayed inside. And…when she opened the doors and came out of her room…….'
'What…?' Arlen spoke.
'It sounds so strange, and to me it didn't make any sense. But…. she was soaking wet. Her dress…it was as if she had fallen into a lake of water fully clothed. But it wasn't just that. The room behind her was……out of order. The curtains and bed sheets were strewn about the place. Water soaked the floor, everything in the room was damp…even the walls when I went back shortly after. And….it was cold in the room….so cold….'
She looked back up at Arlen, waiting for his response.
He was sneering, as if she suddenly disgusted him.
'Have you gone mad woman?'
'Maybe I have' Sarah replied fearfully. 'I don't know if it was real. But if my mind was playing tricks on me…. then the minds of the other servants who helped me clean her room also played the same trick on them.'
Arlen glanced over her head towards the other servants who remained on their knees, huddled together.
'It's true' a braver one spoke up, an older middle-aged lady, nameless to all the men. 'I saw it too.'
'And there is nothing else you can tell me?' Arlen asked, glancing back down at Sarah.
'Nothing' she shook her head.
'Just one more thing' Arlen added before he left. 'The prince. What was his name?'
'Tristan' Sarah breathed.

Arlen strode away in irritation, annoyed at what he had heard.
'What do you think it means?' Shawn asked him, struggling to keep up with his pace.

‘Nonsense’ Arlen spat. ‘That was no help whatsoever. She may as well have kept her mouth shut.’
Shawn slowed to a stop, allowing Arlen to leave his side.
It was sometime later that Arlen returned to the room, back where the others waited for him.
‘So what do we do now?’ Farrell asked him again.
Arlen sighed.
‘I suppose….’ he mused. The mercenaries around him all glanced his way, Shawn and Farrell waited for a response also.
Arlen looked up suddenly, noticing he was the centre of attention.
‘We…’ he went on. He fell silent again.
Farrell watched him closely, wondering how his brother must be feeling.
He’s worked so hard for this day, only to find Amaia gone…
‘I suppose there is only one thing left for us to do’ Arlen finished.
‘What's that?’ Shawn asked.
‘We return, back to Dilston’ Arlen said, ‘and seek Danior. He may be able to help us again.’
‘You think he has answers?’ Shawn asked him.
‘He knows many things’ Arlen replied solemnly. ‘Many things he should not know, many things that no one else knows. He is the only man that has the answers, beside the one who holds her captive…. besides this *Tristan*. This prince.’
Arlen balled his fists, eyes narrowing.
Farrell thought then what must be going through his mind. What was he planning? What could he do now to find Amaia, once she had gone missing for a second time?
‘Do you still desire our services?’ one of the mercenaries grumbled.
‘Yes’ Arlen answered firmly. ‘I do.’
‘When do we leave?’ Farrell asked his brother.
‘Now.’

‘So you were not successful then?’ Danior spoke five days later, the moment he saw Arlen enter the room, with Shawn and Farrell walking behind him. ‘You reached me in good time’ he went on. ‘I was just about to depart to some far-off place. Its luck you caught me now, I will be away for quite some time.’
‘Where is Amaia?’ Arlen demanded.
‘She wasn’t at that place you thought she’d be?’ Danior asked. However, he spoke as if he already knew this.
‘Where is she?’ Arlen repeated.
‘I understand that she died’ Danior replied.
Behind Arlen, Shawn reached a hand forward, grasping Arlen by the shoulder and squeezing hard to reassure him.
‘Don’t lose control’ Shawn whispered to him. ‘Not here.’
‘She is not dead’ Arlen told Danior sternly.

‘How do you know?’ Danior teased. ‘Her grave was within the garden of the grounds. Did you not see it?’
‘How do you know about that?’ Farrell asked.
‘Most of the mercenaries you hired work for me already. I'm sorry, but most of them have already left.’
‘Left?’ Farrell repeated mistrustfully. ‘But…we’ve only just arrived.’
‘And they are hungry for adventure’ Danior gleamed with mischief. ‘I have sent them on another mission. Sorry.’
He didn’t sound in the least bit sorry.
‘But don’t worry’ he added, ‘you still have six left.’
‘Only six?’ Arlen asked flatly.
‘Better than none’ Danior replied, putting on an overcoat and moving towards the door. ‘You must excuse me now, I have to leave.’
‘But you haven’t told us where Amaia is. And anyway, how do you know about the grave?’
Danior glanced back to them.
‘Many of the servants you found there now work for me, including the one called Sarah which you interrogated. As for Amaia, she’s a difficult matter. How is one to find a woman,’ he glanced at Farrell, ‘who went missing twelve years ago? You don’t know where she was last seen, or even what she looks like, as she was taken at such a young age. The only thing you *know* about her now at this point…is her name.’
‘I know the prince Tristan has held her hostage’ Arlen spoke up. ‘I know where she has been held captive for the last several years.’
‘Have you ever seen her?’ Danior asked speaking now to Arlen. ‘Even once? And clearly I mean’ he interrupted as Arlen opened his mouth to speak. ‘Have you seen her up close?’
‘No’ Arlen replied reluctantly through gritted teeth.
‘No’ Danior repeated. ‘She was never allowed outside, that’s why. However, she did sit by the windows. For hours at a time she would gaze outwards, dreaming of freedom. Would you even recognise her if you saw her now?’
‘I would know it was her’ Arlen spoke firmly.
‘But how could you?’ Danior asked showing his hands. ‘She would have changed so much over the years.’
‘I would know’ Arlen repeated. ‘She would look like her mother.’
‘Would she?’ Danior gleamed knowingly.
Arlen fell silent.
‘I don’t know where she is’ Danior went on, ‘but I know that your daughter…’ he looked at neither Arlen nor Farrell ask he spoke this, ‘I know she is unique.’ He lifted his hand to his head, brushing his slick hair back. ‘There is a young woman I have heard of that has the same abilities as Amaia is supposed to have. There is a good chance that she is the one you seek. Her kind are so rare after all. She is in the village of Augsburg. She should be easy enough to find, you passed the village on the way to find the prince’s manor.’
‘How will we know her?’ Arlen asked Danior.
‘You will know her when you see her. I am sure of this.’
‘How do you know of all of these things?’ Arlen asked him.

‘There is much I know that others do not’ Danior replied vaguely. ‘But in the case of this woman in Augsburg…. a blind child could find her.’
‘How will we find you if we need your help again?’
‘You won’t’ Danior said. ‘I'm leaving in a few days, and I'm going for good. By the time you reach your destination, you won’t have time to make the return journey before I depart.’
‘Why are you leaving?’
‘War is coming.’
‘What?’ Arlen scoffed.
‘Your quest’ Danior went on. ‘It will lead you to war.’
‘I find that hard to believe’ Arlen said flatly.
‘And yet it is so’ Danior bowed.
‘I feel you know more about this than you’re telling’ Arlen said narrowing his eyes distrustfully.
Danior smiled. ‘If there is anything else you want to know, then ask me now.’
The room fell silent.
‘Then I shall make my way’ Danior said.
He walked away briskly without a backwards glance, Arlen watched him closely as he went.
‘For a man who’s supposed to know everything, I would have thought…’ but he never finished his sentence.
‘What did he mean by saying that Amaia is unique and rare, and what did he mean by *abilities*?’ Shawn asked them.
‘Fucked if I know’ Farrell shrugged beside him, scratching at his splint.
They returned to the ground floor where their horses waited for them, and indeed as they had been told, over half of the mercenaries that had accompanied them had vanished. Now there were only six.
‘What are our orders?’ one of the nameless mercenaries spoke.
‘We travel to Augsburg’ Arlen told them.

Chapter Twenty-Six
A Chance Encounter

The journey was to take about two days or thereabouts. On the first night, they camped deep in the woods, where their fire would draw little attention.
The band of men sat on the uneven ground around the fire, each minding their own business, eating or tending to the horses tethered nearby or warming their hands by the fire. Arlen sat the furthest away, with his back to the others, staring off into the woods where the firelight could not reach him.
More than once Farrell glanced his way, and he occasionally heard Arlen mumbling to himself, often repeating the same thing.
‘She was so close….and I just missed her. By a day maybe? Or maybe a week? What happened to her? She was so close….’

‘So what's the deal with you and him then?’
Farrell looked away from his brother, turning his attention to one of the mercenaries that had spoken. The first thing he noticed about this man was a great scar that covered one side of his face, a burn. It looked to be many years old.
‘I don’t do back stories’ Farrell answered flatly.
‘Oh, I see’ the gruff old mercenary nodded. ‘That bad eh?’
Farrell arched an eyebrow at the older man, leaning away from him as the mercenary deliberately sat uncomfortably close.
‘I know you two don’t get along’ the mercenary went on. ‘I hope there won’t be any *problems* along our journey.’
‘How do you know we don’t get along?’ Farrell asked him.
‘I was one of the men who pulled him off you’ the mercenary smirked. ‘Did a good job on you he did. That arm will take *ages* to heal.’
Farrell glanced down at his arm, supported by a splint and resting in a sling. He felt suddenly self-conscious.
‘He’s a good fighter that one’ the mercenary said nodding towards Arlen. ‘I recon it will be a good job fighting alongside one like him. You on the other hand, well I wouldn’t want you to slow us down.’
‘I'm a better fighter than him’ Farrell answered resentfully, glaring at Arlen and feeling hurt for what he had done to him.
‘Better? Ha ha!’ the mercenary cackled. ‘Not from what I saw. He kicked your arse he did.’
‘It’s true’ Farrell said irritatingly. ‘He never used to want to fight with me because he knew I would always beat him.’
‘So you were childhood friends?’
‘No, we’re brothers.’
‘Brothers eh? So what happened?’
Farrell realised he had been tricked into answering as much as he had, and he quickly shut his mouth.
‘Suit yourself’ the mercenary snickered, seeing Farrell’s reaction. ‘I get it…you don’t do back stories. Just answer me this if you will. If you're stronger than him then why did you let him beat you so good?’
‘He’s my brother’ Farrell replied. ‘I didn’t want to…...’
‘Oh boy, you must have done something *really* bad to piss him off that much’ the mercenary gleamed happily. ‘Last I heard he wanted to *kill* you!’
‘Are you genuinely trying to make me feel better?’ Farrell snarled. ‘Or are you deliberately being an arse?’
‘So who’s that guy?’ the mercenary asked, pointing at Shawn and ignoring Farrell’s question.
Shawn glanced up.
‘He’s….’ Farrell began. ‘His name is Shawn’ he finished.
‘Hello!’ the mercenary waved.
Shawn nodded back.
‘So who’s that then?’ the mercenary asked again.
Farrell, fed up now rolled his eyes and turned away.
‘I'm Farrell’s nephew’ Shawn explained. ‘He’s my uncle.’

‘Oh, I can just *feel* the love between you’ the mercenary said loudly, clapping his hands on his knees and gleaming eagerly from Farrell to Shawn, his cheeks rosy red.
‘Have you been drinking?’ Farrell mumbled.
‘Not yet. Ahaw haw haaaw!’
‘So what's your name?’ Shawn asked him.
‘Call me Barrel. It rhymes with Farrell. Ahaw haw haw!’
‘Is that really your name?’ Shawn asked dubiously.
‘No’ Barrel sang back. ‘You don’t know us and so we can call ourselves whatever we like. Let’s see’ he said leaning back and looking over at the other five mercenaries. ‘That’s Carrot. That’s Blunkit. That’s Flunkit. That’s Woodworm and that’s Flute Stick.’
‘Why am I Woodworm?’ the one he had pointed to glowered in annoyance.
‘Oh come now Woodworm’ Barrel laughed. ‘Don’t be such a wet drip.’ He leaned towards Shawn, nudging him in the side and whispering very loudly. ‘Don’t get on the wrong side of him. He’s the serious one, and he couldn’t tell a joke if it stripped naked and danced in front of him.’
Shawn smirked back at the man, clearly amused.
‘You're a strange one’ Shawn said.
‘Oh, I'm going to sleep’ Farrell huffed loudly, rising quickly from his seat and grabbing his blankets as he went.
He found a spot away from the others, lying down on a relatively soft and even patch of earth to rest.
Feeling the gentle warmth of the fire against his back, he spared one last glance towards Arlen, who remained where he sat, before sighing deeply, and giving himself up to his dreams.
‘Find me…’

The next morning, he woke early and abruptly, hearing the sound of food cooking behind him.
Rolling over he saw one of the mercenaries making his breakfast. Everyone else was still sleeping, save for Arlen. He was nowhere to be seen.
‘Are you hungry?’ the red haired mercenary asked Farrell.
‘Yes.’
The mercenary held out a plate for him, and Farrell took it, staring down at the sausages. He glanced up at the man.
‘Carrot is it?’ he asked.
‘Yes’ the mercenary nodded, speaking in a thick accent. ‘That it seems is to be my new name.’
Farrell nodded.
‘Is that food?’ came a loud voice. ‘Do I smell food?’
Farrell could not stifle a groan as Barrel woke suddenly, leaping to his feet and dashing towards the fire.
‘Sausages!’ he cried. ‘I love sausages!’

Beside Farrell, Shawn woke, groaning and rubbing his eyes, his brow furrowed at the disturbance.
‘What's the noise for?’ he mumbled as he sat up.
‘Dammit Barrel!’ Woodworm snapped loudly as he sat bolt upright. ‘Can’t you keep your mouth shut for a bloody change?’
Carrot sighed as the two began to argue. Neither Blunkit, Flunkit nor Flute Stick seemed bothered by this as they rose, heading slowly to the fire and taking turns in cooking their breakfasts.
It was not long after that when Arlen returned, walking into the group; he ignored Barrel who struggled in a headlock, fighting to save his breakfast that Woodworm was trying to steal from him.
‘There you are’ Carrot voiced. ‘The man who never sleeps.’
‘We’re going’ Arlen declared.
‘Now?’ Shawn asked curiously. ‘Why so soon?’
‘I'm anxious to get there as fast as possible’ Arlen replied. ‘If this woman is really Amaia…. I don’t want to lose her again.’
Farrell watched his brother as he spoke, thinking how strange it was that even out here, he applied the heavy black makeup around his eyes. He looked so different to the man he once knew, the scars, the beard, the broken nose…
Shawn yawned loudly as the group packed up their camp swiftly, loading up the horses and setting off with Arlen leading the way.

It was a full moon on the night they arrived at their destination. Blunkit and Flunkit went away to find an inn to sleep that night, and a short time later, Farrell was lying on his back on the bed in an unfamiliar room, staring up at the ceiling. Quickly through exhaustion, he fell into a deep sleep and began to dream.

‘Find me…’

When he woke, light was pouring into his tiny room. It was morning.
Farrell was ashamed to realise he had been the last to rise. By the time he had dressed and gone downstairs, the bar was silent, save for a lone figure quietly tidying one of the tables in the corner of the room. Farrell guessed her to be the barman’s daughter or some other close relation, she shared a striking resemblance to the tired-eyed man they spoke to the night before. He paid her no attention as he crossed the room, stepping outside into the bright day beyond the dim ambience of the inn behind him. It was already nearly midday, and every man and woman that Farrell saw from where he stood in the doorway moved swiftly. The place they had come to was a simple village, smaller than the home he once lived but built over a wider area. The people dressed in practical clothes, the women had their hair tied up, and the more that Farrell looked around him, the more he begun to feel homesick.
‘Farrell!’ called Shawn from nearby. ‘There you are.’
‘Where are the others?’ Farrell asked him as Shawn jogged up to him.
‘Don’t know’ he shrugged. ‘They're about somewhere looking for *her*. Danior said that she would be easy to find, he said a blind child could find her.’

‘You haven’t found her yet, have you?’ Farrell answered flatly, guessing from the tone of Shawn’s voice.
‘No’ he shook his head. ‘Not yet.’

It was several hours later, nearly two o’clock in the afternoon, that Farrell and Shawn found themselves sitting upon a low wall watching the men and women in the field work. Farrell watched a young girl lifting a surprisingly large bale of hay and carrying it across the field without too much effort. Once she had put it down where she wanted, she turned to get another. Farrell thought then of what life could have been like if things had been different. Perhaps his daughter could have been that girl, and not the pampered little darling she had been raised as. He realised then that as long as he had known her, Amaia had never worked a day in her life, or done any work in any form for that matter.
He looked at the girl again.
She looked happy.
‘Here’ Shawn said to him, interrupting his thoughts as he passed Farrell a platter of cheese.
It was past lunchtime and the two were ravenous, having not eaten yet today. They shared a few meagre portions they had bought from the innkeeper, and had sat outside together to eat.
It was warm on this day; the air was humid. The longer Farrell sat where he was, the hotter he felt. He was just contemplating returning inside where it was cooler, when another voice interrupted his thoughts.
‘Ahoy there!’
Farrell turned scowling towards Barrel who was waving jovially at the two of them, the top of his head just visible over the wall he stood behind, his great scar shining in the sunlight.
‘What is it?’ Shawn called back.
‘Perhaps there is something here you would like to see’ Barrel answered back being deliberately cryptic.
Farrell’s initial annoyance at the sight of him instantly vanished, to be replaced with hope and nervousness.
He rose quickly, leaving the platter of cheese on the wall and jogging over to where Barrel waited for them.
The two approached the wall, jumping over it to join Barrel on the other side who was smiling. Farrell glanced about him expectantly.
‘What?’ he demanded in annoyance.
‘Look’ Barrel breathed. ‘Over there, do you see?’
Both Farrell and Shawn surveyed the scene ahead of them, a medium sized field where there worked many. But Farrell noticed something strange. Standing on the edge of the field was a small crowd. They talked and muttered amongst each other, pointing to a spot in the centre of the field.
Farrell furrowed his brow curiously, glancing back to the field itself, and to those who worked within it.
And then he saw.
A young woman was standing with her back to him. She had long black hair.

Farrell swallowed back the lump in his throat, scratching his sweaty palms as he approached her slowly. As he did so, he was vaguely aware of another figure near him. It was Arlen.
The young woman half-turned, standing with her side to him and staring down at her hands as she did so. The pile of soil she held in her cupped hands changed, before his very eyes.
From the soil she held, grew flowers. Great twisting vines and bright coloured leaves and petals.
Farrell drew a sharp intake of breath, taking a swift step back uncertainly.
In the woman's hands the plants grew, spilling over her fingers and pouring down to the earth, she smiled down warmly as she watched.
Good lords Farrell realised. *She's doing this!*
One of the men in the crowd that watched at the edge of the field cried out.
'Witch!' he declared loudly striding threateningly towards her. 'What sorcery is this?'
He was quickly seized by his companions who held him back, speaking hurried words to him to calm him down.
The woman, startled by this had dropped the handful of soil, and the plants she held in a matter of seconds withered and died. She had for the briefest moment been afraid, but had recovered quickly. One of the men that had watched bowed repeatedly to her, fumbling over his apologies for his friend's behaviour as he showed the palms of his hands in submission.
The woman watched the small group as they dragged their angry friend away. A few others lingered, as if waiting to see what she would do next.
Farrell glanced back at her, remembering the words Danior had spoken.
I don't know where she is, but I know that your daughter…I know she is unique.
'This…isn't possible' Farrell mumbled to himself in disbelief. 'Magic…. doesn't exist…it must be a trick…'
His heart jolted again suddenly, as he realised the woman was watching him.
'Hello' she said.
His words were caught in his throat, and for ages, he just stared at her.
The young woman slowly lifted her arms; holding herself as she began to avoid his gaze. Farrell realised he was making her uncomfortable.
'I'm sorry' he stammered. 'I…I didn't mean to….'
'What do you want?' she asked him, speaking harshly now.
'I just….' Farrell struggled to gather his thoughts and form them into a sentence.
He looked straight at her.
'What is your name?'
'My name?' she repeated curiously. 'Oh. It's Annabel.'
His world came crashing down. He knees began to shake.
'Has it always been Annabel?' he asked her hopelessly.
'Yes' she replied, frowning at the absurdity of his question. 'It's all I've ever been known as.'
He let out a desperate sob, head descending into his hands. His body hunched over. He fell slowly to his knees, and began crying in the dirt.
Annabel stared down at him in wide eyed shock.

‘I don’t know what came over me’ Farrell was saying in a mumble. ‘I never really thought I'd see her again, but when I saw that woman….’ Farrell gritted his teeth. ‘I thought……. gods……what if it *is* really her. But….’ He trailed off.
‘It’s ok’ Barrel sang happily, sitting on the wall behind him. ‘I too have felt the sting of grief.’
‘Have you?’ Farrell asked him uncertainly.
Barrel didn’t answer him; instead he began to laugh hysterically at nothing.
Farrell turned away from him in annoyance.
‘We shouldn’t lose hope’ Shawn told him, standing on his other side. ‘If Amaia is still alive, then she’s out there somewhere waiting for us to find her. We mustn’t give up.’
The other mercenaries sat nearby, even Arlen was there. A tender expression had crossed his face. Perhaps he felt some sympathy for his brother. Perhaps he felt like Farrell really did care after all.
Farrell glanced up at Arlen who stood behind him with his arms folded. Farrell dared to speak.
‘Perhaps I can mend the sins of the past.’
A dark cloud instantly descended upon Arlen. His muscles tensed, and his upper lip twitched in a sneer.
He glowered, and opened his mouth as if about to say something. But he quickly changed his mind, making a noise of disgust and storming off quickly.
The new and unfamiliar Arlen was back.
‘So’ Carrot the ginger haired mercenary said loudly, ‘what do we do now?’
‘I think he means where do we go from here?’ Woodworm the other mercenary interrupted. ‘What do you want us to do? You did hire us after all, and if we can no longer be of any use, then there’s no point of us being here.’
‘He’s right’ Flute Stick sighed, his accent was of foreign origin, like Carrot’s. ‘If we’ve well and truly hit a dead end, then we may as well move on and look for our next adventure.’
Blunkit and Flunkit watched Farrell expectedly, waiting for a response.
Farrell didn’t answer. Instead he ignored all their stares, even Shawn’s. He was deep in thought. Seeing Annabel had given him a flicker of hope to their seemingly hopeless quest, and for the briefest of moments, he thought he had found her. She did look a bit like what Amaia might have looked like; she even looked to be about the same age.
Amaia would be nineteen by now.
‘Well if you're not going to give us any orders’ Woodworm declared, ‘then we will release ourselves from your service.’
The small group of six mercenaries began to disperse.
‘Wait!’ Farrell called after them in a sudden panic. ‘Don’t go. We might still need you.’
‘We’re not going to wait around for the seasons to pass’ Flute Stick smirked back at him, not even pausing in his strides. ‘We’ve travelled all this way for nothing. This is boring. This isn’t what we wanted.’
Farrell buried his face in his hands, fighting against yet another wave of despair that threatened to drown him. He forced himself to think clearly, forced himself not to give up again.
When he lifted his head at last, he found the mercenaries gone and that Shawn had left him.

He was alone.

Farrell returned to the inn, intending to go to his room and pack up what meagre possessions he had brought with him. A few basic clothes, some food, a few weapons, some pots and hunting equipment. Now everything he owned could fit into a few small bags. After his horse Alastor had been stolen, he had bought a few things he might need in his time in Dilston, using the money Arlen had given him. Now, the money was all but spent.
When he entered the inn, he found to his surprise the six mercenaries sitting around one of the tables eating.
'I thought you'd have gone by now' he said to them.
'Don't be silly' Blunkit scoffed. 'We've got a long road to travel. We're not doing it on empty stomachs. Don't worry. We'll be out of your hair in no time.'
Farrell turned his back on them, heading back outside. He thought to himself then. *We don't know where we're going. I guess there's no rush to leave.* He lifted his gaze. The air around was beginning to cool as the day grew late, and slowly people were returning to their homes, the fields becoming empty.
Farrell saw a strange sight before him then, a man wearing dishevelled travelling clothes, sitting upon a white horse.
The only people in this kingdom to have a white horse, were…
Royalty? Farrell thought incredulous. *What on earth is he doing here?*
The man appeared to be surveying the village before him, standing upon the lip of a small hill. He noticed suddenly Farrell staring at him. The stranger turned his horse around, tapping his heels into the beast's flanks, sending it trotting away with a flick of its tail.
Farrell frowned after him, feeling a strange sensation in his stomach. Something didn't feel quite right, seeing a royal white horse in a distant and seemingly unimportant village made him suddenly uneasy.
He retreated back into the inn, returning to his room where he sat upon his bed and brooded.

An hour or so passed, and when Farrell finally decided to get up, he noticed movement out of the window.
There were horses riding away. The mercenaries were leaving.
He ran outside to join Shawn and Arlen as they watched them depart. Regret filled his heart as he watched the band of six slowly ride away.
Beside him Arlen heaved a heavy sigh.
Arlen straightened then, uncrossing his arms. Shawn became suddenly tense.
Farrell too had heard several voices nearby. They were speaking in confrontation.
The mercenaries also were pulling their horses back; all of them staring off to the right, where something was going on.
'What's that?' Shawn asked. 'Hey wait!' he said to Arlen who rushed forwards towards the noise.
Shawn and Farrell followed instinctively. They ran to a section behind a wall, a scene lay out before them that was previously blocked from view.

It was Annabel again, and that strange man Farrell had seen earlier that day, the one upon the white horse. They were surrounded by a small group of soldiers.
The stranger seemed to be trying to reason with Annabel, who was becoming hysterical. The stranger then walked away; the soldiers around him on his order grabbed Annabel. They began to drag her.
In one swift movement, Flunkit had drawn his bow, killing one of the soldiers in one shot.
'Ah shit' Farrell said.
Without a second thought Arlen and Shawn had charged forwards with swords raised, Farrell's pleas for them to stop fell on deaf ears as nearby; the mercenaries wheeled their horses around and rode towards the soldiers, weapons at the ready. The stranger who had walked away paused to stare back with indifference as his men were attacked.
The soldiers in their confusion hesitated in their retaliation, and suffered for it. In a matter of mere seconds, the soldiers were all dead and the stranger who had commanded them looked on silently, he stayed rooted to the spot. Annabel cowered at the feet of the tall horses the mercenaries rode around her; she had her head buried in her arms and was too frightened to look up or even move.
'Do you realise what you've done?' the stranger asked boldly, with not a hint of fear in his voice at the armed men that vastly outnumbered him.
'Perhaps you should make yourself scarce' Woodworm suggested to him, leaning confidently forwards in his saddle, 'or else my friend here might be tempted to put a nice long arrow between your eyes.'
Flunkit still held his bow, relaxed, but indeed with an arrow in place ready to fire. Barrel began to cackle for no apparent reason.
The stranger hesitated, looking from one face to the next as he surveyed them. He was remembering each of the men.
And then his sight fell upon Farrell. A strange expression crossed him, as if he recognised Farrell, but couldn't remember from where.
'Are you deaf man?' Arlen asked him. 'Leave now or die.'
'You've made a huge mistake' the stranger spoke casually to all of them. 'You're stuck with this girl now' he indicated Annabel. 'She will be hunted, and now…so will the rest of you.'
He whistled loudly then; and from over the hill came trotting towards him a white stallion.
The six mercenaries, Arlen and Shawn all stared in shock and disbelief, jaws hanging and eyes wide.
The stranger quickly mounted his steed, speaking brief words to all of them before leaving.
'We *will* meet again.'
And then he was gone.
Flute Stick was the first to break the silence.
'Fuck….'
'Oh my god' Carrot said. 'Was that the frikkin prince?!'
'What's he doing here?' Blunkit worried.
Farrell rounded on them suddenly.
'Why did you do that?' Farrell demanded of Flunkit. 'Why did you kill that soldier and provoke an attack?'
'I don't know' he shrugged carelessly. 'I didn't really think.'

‘Didn’t think?!’ Farrell hollered. ‘You idiot!’
‘We’re hunted now apparently’ Arlen told them all, speaking with a casual air as if it didn’t really matter.
‘And now we’re stuck with this girl?’ Woodworm asked.
‘Apparently so’ Flunkit added.
The young woman still cowered beneath them. The others managed to hear a few brief words she mumbled under her breath.
‘Please……don’t hurt me….’
‘He’s sure to be back soon’ Shawn told the rest of them. ‘What do we do?’

Chapter Twenty-Seven
Underground

The band of nine men made their departure swift, travelling east, away from the village in no particular direction.
‘Why did we bring her again?’
‘We don’t know what will happen to her if we leave her’ Shawn told Woodworm. ‘We don’t even know if those men planned to kill her. She is hunted, and now so are we. It makes sense to bring her with us.’
He looked to Annabel as he spoke; she was riding behind Flute Stick, holding onto the back of him tightly. She seemed so frightened, it looked as if she couldn’t hear their conversation; so wrapped up was she in coping with this new and unfamiliar stress.
‘Maybe we should kill her ourselves and save the trouble’ Woodworm said glaring at her.
‘And if she is wanted alive?’ Shawn reasoned with him as they rode. ‘What would be the punishment for all of us if we do such a thing? If she is wanted by royalty…. she must be important. Imagine what they would do to *us*.’
Woodworm fell silent in thought.
‘The horses are tired’ he said. ‘Maybe it’s a good idea if we rest them.’
‘No’ Arlen shot back at them. ‘We have to reach the other side of that hill’ he said pointing to a place some distance away. ‘We have to get out of sight of the village.’
‘You think they still chase us?’ Flute Stick asked uncertainly.
Arlen glanced back towards the village.
‘We mustn’t take the chance.’

As the sky began to darken, the small band of men dismounted their horses, clinging to the edge of the tree line watching the horizon. Annabel, clearly still terrified sat at the base of one of the trees with her knees pulled up; eyes darting all around her in a state of heightened awareness. The others, her ‘captors’, stood around her.
‘Why did you take me?’ she sobbed. ‘I didn’t get a chance to say goodbye to my parents. I didn’t get a chance to say goodbye…’

An image flashed in Farrell's mind then as he listened to her words, and he thought of how he had been a part of the group that had taken Annabel from her parents without a word, and killed those men.
And then he remembered something from long past.

Arlen burst through the doors to his manor.
'FARRELL!' he cried.
'What is it Arlen?' Farrell demanded.
'Ramana is dead!' Arlen blurted out. 'Amaia is missing. She's been taken!'
'We have to go now! We have to look for her.'
Guided by Arlen's directions, Farrell rode out of the village, and to the section of woodland where Ramana's body rested.
Arlen was able to slide off the horse, just before Farrell sent Alastor racing onwards, followed by the other mounted soldiers in search of the culprit.
Further down the road, Farrell and his men had ridden.
Farrell pulled his horse back, surveying the bodies of twelve soldiers that lay scattered in their path, soldiers who were armed and armoured.
It looked as if they had been ambushed.
They were all dead. And Amaia could not be found.

'It's like it's happened all over again' Farrell mumbled to himself incoherently, 'but this time…. the other way around….'
'What are my parents going to think?' Annabel continued to worry, wiping her teary eyes. 'They're going to be so worried…. I never got to say goodbye…' she repeated.
'Well you've lost your chance now' Woodworm replied heartlessly.
'Don't be so cruel' Carrot scowled at him.
'What are you going to do with me?' Annabel asked tentatively, frightened of what the answer might be.
'Well you can't go home' Flunkit told her. 'Not now.'
'Are you going to kill me?' she asked, her voice as quiet as a mouse.
'Yes' Woodworm answered callously, eyes gleaming brightly in the last sliver of red sun that clawed at the edge of the horizon. 'We are going to slaughter you…piece by piece. We are going to cut you open, pull out your intestines….and murder you…. from the inside out….'
Annabel paled instantly.
Shawn rose to his feet before Woodworm had even finished his sentence. He struck him hard across the face with the back of his hand with all the force he can muster.
Woodworm stumbled, body hunched over as he slowly comprehended what had just happened.
When he turned back to Shawn, it was in a swift movement, with knife in hand.
Shawn caught Woodworm's arm as he made a lunge for him, directing the knife away. The two began to wrestle, Shawn holding Woodworm's arm down, hands tight around Woodworms hand that held the knife. The others rose to stop them. Barrel and Carrot grabbed onto Woodworm, pulling him back. Someone grabbed Shawn from behind, holding

him under the arms and disabling him. Without a second thought Shawn threw his head back hard, head butting Flunkit in the face. Flunkit stumbled back, hands over his bleeding nose as he protested loudly.
Shawn was about to go for Woodworm again, but Arlen came between them, hand upon Shawn's chest, pushing him back.
'Enough' he said calmly.
Shawn let out a breath, stepping away.
'They're following us' Flute Stick told the others loudly, his accent was thick.
Everyone tensed then, approaching the top of the hill to see a group of men riding towards them, led by a man on a white horse.
Flute Stick grabbed Annabel roughly by the shoulders, lifting her onto his horse and mounting the saddle before her. She whimpered pathetically, squeezing her eyes tight, too frightened to look at what was happening as she held onto the back of Flute Stick. The others mounted quickly their horses, ridding in the opposite direction to the men that pursued them.
'Where do we go?!' Farrell called to the others as they rode.
'I know the way' Blunkit answered, kicking his horse hard in the flank. 'Follow me!' He wheeled the animal around and towards the left, heading to the forest nearby.
The sky was getting dark now, and as their pursuers were riding fast, they were gaining ground.
They managed to lose them in the woods, following Blunkit who led them to a mouth of a cave, the band descended through the chasm. They were forced to slow as the horses began to stumble on the uneasy ground, neighing in worry and tossing their heads. They dismounted, leading the creatures on foot now.
The small group hid in the darkness, waiting for time to pass.
After a while they began to relax.
'I think they're gone' Arlen spoke at last.
'We can't go back out there' Flunkit told them. 'It's not safe. They'll find us for sure.'
'Then let's traverse the cave' Woodworm said. 'It has to come out somewhere.'
'But what about the horses?'
'We'll take them as far as we can' Woodworm replied. 'We can always leave them and find new ones later if they can't make it through.'
'I'm not carrying all those bags myself' Flunkit argued.
'In any case' Blunkit spoke up. 'It's too dark to travel. We're not going anywhere now; it would be too dangerous to try.'
'I could light the way' Annabel spoke up bravely. 'I could make it safe.'
The mercenaries fell silent then. They all paused as they considered her. Annabel felt suddenly uneasy, being the centre of attention for all these men she found so scary.
Blunkit frowned thoughtfully at her. 'I think we're safe enough waiting here for the moment. And besides, I think we could all do with some rest, you especially.'
Annabel sat back as the others milled around, fumbling in the dark to their horses and unpacking their bags, rolling out their sleeping mats and lying down uncomfortably on the rocky floor. They were only just about able to see each other in the failing light; and recognised each other now only by their voices as they spoke.

‘I’ll keep watch’ Flunkit told the others quickly before moving away and slipping out of sight.
When things had settled down, Shawn approached Annabel, offering her his sleeping mat.
‘Thank you’ she whispered to him, taking in tentatively.
‘What did you mean when you said you could light the way’ Shawn asked her as she sat down.
It was quiet in the cave, and her voice echoed slightly as she spoke, she was clearly heard by all the others.
‘I am not like other people’ Annabel told as Shawn sat on the rocky ground beside her. ‘I can wield magic and do things that others would never think even possible.’
Farrell listened to her as she spoke, and suddenly remembered Danior’s words that he had spoken, what now felt like years ago.
‘There is a woman I have heard of that has the same abilities as Amaia is supposed to have. There is a good chance that she is the one you seek. Her kind are so rare after all.’
‘What do they call your kind?’ Farrell asked turning to her.
‘My kind?’ Annabel said. ‘We are known as Weather Makers.’
‘Weather Makers?’ Carrot spoke in his accent, leaning forward closer to her.
‘What are they?’ Shawn asked her.
‘We are beings who can use magic to manipulate the elements, and bend them to our will. There are more of us out there, many throughout history, but our kind are scattered. There was once a time when we were many. Now we are rare.’
‘How do you know all of this?’ Flute Stick asked her.
‘My grandmother was a Weather Maker’ Annabel explained.
‘Soooo’ Arlen said, speaking slowly. ‘You're saying…. this ability is passed from parent to child?’
‘Yes’ Annabel told him. ‘Occasionally it skips a generation, but if your mother was a Weather Maker, then there is a high chance you will be one too. Well…except if you’re a boy. For some reason there are only female Weather Makers.’
‘How strange’ Arlen mused.
‘Hey Arlen’ Farrell said with surety. ‘Do you ever remember seeing Ramana’s mother at all?’
Arlen was so caught up in the strangeness of the situation and the strange question he had just been asked, that he forgot for a moment he still hated Farrell.
‘No?’ Arlen replied without hesitation. ‘Why would you ask that?’
‘Do you remember’ Farrell went on, ‘that all her early life Ramana was kept behind walls…?’
Arlen stared at his brother with his brow furrowed and mouth half open.
The penny dropped.
‘Oh gods’ Arlen said. ‘You're saying Ramana was a Weather Maker?!’
‘Her. Her mother. Amaia. Why do you think Ramana was hidden from the world for so long? She was imprisoned for the first eighteen years of her life. Why do you think her father kept her behind such high walls? Why do you think that neither of us ever met her mother, not once in all those years?’
‘I just thought that the grief from losing so many children…’ Arlen trailed off.
The other mercenaries, unfamiliar with the situation the brothers spoke of listened silently.

Arlen stated at his knees as he spoke.
'That day…' he said quietly, 'the day she was killed…everything seemed out of place.'
'We found bodies further down the road' Farrell informed him. 'I never told you before…'
'Bodies?'
'Dead men. Soldiers, bearing the crest of the king. But…one of them bore no injuries at all. It was as if he had suddenly died of a heart attack. But he wasn't that old.'
'You think that was Ramana's doing?' Arlen asked lifting his head.
'I don't know' Farrell shook his head. 'It could be Amaia's doing for all we know.'
Arlen looked back at his knees. 'I saw something strange also. It seems unimportant now…but…'
'What?' Farrell asked.
Arlen looked up again. 'There was a great crack running across the road. I walked in the woods often in those days, and have never seen anything like it. The falling leaves hid it from view…but I tripped….and….' he shook his head as if to clear unpleasant thoughts. 'It was so out of place.'
'That does sound like something a Weather Maker could do' Annabel spoke up.
'What do you mean?' Arlen asked her.
Shawn's attention and the attention of the silent mercenaries moved onto her now.
'While each Weather Maker is different, each has many powers, many of which they can combine. It is possible for some to crack the earth, and to stop a man's heart in his chest and kill him where he stands.'
'Can *you* do that?' Carrot asked her.
'*I* can't' Annabel replied. 'But there are others who can. Each Weather Maker is as different as the changing seasons.'
As the mercenaries began to question Annabel of her abilities, Farrell became lost in thought.
Perhaps this is why Amaia was taken? All of this seems so strange…could it really be true?
And then he remembered something, a time long ago, when he lived another life, a different one to the one he led now. He suddenly remembers strange things that happened around his wife, things that at the time he had not spared a second thought to…but now….

Ramana….

Farrell gazed at the painting. It was beautiful indeed. A stunning scene of woodland; with tall grass between the trees and lush green leaves in the branches. There was only a thin sliver between the trees in the centre of the painting where the blue sky could be seen. At the forefront was a doe, walking across the painting.
'It's wonderful' Farrell told her. 'You're very skilled.'
'Oh?' Ramana teased as she covered up the painting again. 'You think so?'
Farrell took her by the hand, kissing the back of her hand tenderly. His eyes lifted to hers, and he pulled her to him, slowly, holding her body close to his.

'Not a day has passed' Farrell said, 'since the day Amaia was born, that I haven't felt like the luckiest and happiest man on earth. The both of you have given me so much joy….and so much grief.'

'And you are still happy' Ramana asked him, brushing his cheek, 'even though we give you grief?'

'I wouldn't give you away for the world' Farrell murmured. 'Either of you.'

Ramana lifted her beautiful eyes to Farrell's, staring deeply into him.

'I know you speak the truth' she said. 'I feel it in my heart.' She stepped back. 'I would rather we spend one day together, than face the ages of this world apart. I want to be with you, now, and forever. In this life…' she sighed happily, 'and the next.'

'Well' Farrell smirked approaching her. 'I do not believe in an afterlife. I think time is precious, time is short. I believe we spend far too short a time on this earth, too short a life we live, too soon we die.' He moved towards her, his lips hovering over hers as he cupped her face in his hands. 'I believe we should make the most of the things we love.'

'I think' Ramana whispered in sweet breath, 'that you speak the truth.'

She glided away from him quickly, moving out of the room. Farrell followed her, heading towards the corridor where she was waiting for him.

Farrell glanced about the hall around him curiously, noticing suddenly that all the burning candles that had lit up the room had quickly been extinguished. Even those that were far away had been put out; when he was sure they had been burning not a moment ago.

He noticed Ramana then. She was standing a short distance away from him in the centre of the hall, the moonlight from the window nearby lit up one side of her body in a white light.

Her skin glowed. She looked radiant, beautiful, like a goddess herself. She giggled childishly, skipping away from him into the next room. The lights in the next room instantly went out.

'Wait!' Farrell called after her.

The house had fallen quickly silent; there was not a sound to be heard. Farrell listened carefully, noticing more of the candles being blown out as Ramana crept through the manor, teasing him. Before long, the only light that existed, was that given by the moon, pure white against the dark sky above, frozen in the air in its celestial beauty.

Farrell stepped slowly across the hall, moving carefully to avoid bumping into something. He moved into the next room, taking in what little he could see. Dark shapes, and outlines of the furniture.

He looked around him; utter silence was all he experienced now. He saw no movement. Farrell spoke, but it felt like he was addressing the very darkness himself.

'Ramana?'

His voice, though he spoke it softly, sounded loud in the still world around him.

'Where are you?' he whispered now, as if speaking to himself.

He felt a touch from behind him, arms reaching gently around him, holding him tenderly. Ramana rested her cheek against his back, sighing deeply, content.

Farrell lowered his head, smiling. He lifted his hands to Ramana's arms that held him, holding her to him.

'I love you' she whispered from behind him.

'I love you too' Farrell responded.

He heard her sigh happily again.

She let go of him, and he turned, but she was gone.
The next he saw her; she was waiting on the stairs. Noticing that he had spotted her, she skipped away, heading up the stairs towards their bedroom.
He followed her, stepping carefully through the darkness and up the stairs. He reached the open door to their bedroom. Two hands reached out of the shadows and grabbed him, pulling him into the room.
Farrell bent forward and kissed his wife, the two wrapped up in each other's arms. Farrell felt something strange, like an electrical current running through his body as he touched her. The hairs on his body were standing on end as they caressed one another.
He pushed her back into the room, further and further until the back of her legs touched the end of the bed. She slowly fell back onto the bed, inviting him towards her. Ramana reached her bare foot out to him, running it down Farrell's chest. Through the closed window, the full moon shone, and Farrell could see his wife lying back on the bed. Her long beautiful black hair thrown back and her arms above her head as she watched Farrell expectantly. The clouds gliding across the sky outside concealed the moon once again. The bedroom fell into shadow, and Ramana's outline as she lay on the bed, became concealed.
The room became suddenly cold. Farrell heard Ramana shifting on the bed before him, perhaps moving away to give him space to enter. Farrell moved onto the bed, reaching Ramana who had crawled toward the headboard. Bearing over her, Farrell felt a cold draft on the back of his neck, though the window was closed.
He lifted the skirt of her dress up, running his hand up her thigh. Ramana shivered, her breath shuddering.
The room felt cold, felt icy.
Ramana grabbed his shirt roughly, ripping it apart and tearing the buttons away, running her claws down his chest. Farrell did not flinch as her scratches left red marks on him. He ran his fingers through her hair, as her hands ran down his lean and muscular frame and to his belt. She fumbled in the darkness, trying to undo the thing. He helped her, throwing the belt and the trousers away and turning his attention back onto her.
Their bellies touched.
Ramana gasped, throwing her head back onto the pillows as she drew a deep breath. She moaned; reaching out to Farrell and wrapping her arms around his neck, pulling him close into a deep kiss.
Minutes later, Farrell's pace began to quicken, until he let out a final breath, sighing in pleasure as he felt Ramana below him stiffen.
Their breathing slowed, and Farrell pulled away from her, his skin beaded in sweat. He collapsed beside her, feeling in his chest his beating heart slowly return to its normal rhythm.
Ramana lay on her back beside him, though he couldn't see her clearly, she was smiling to the ceiling.
Ramana lifted a hand slowly to her head, brushing her hair back.
'You've messed up my hair.'
Farrell chuckled to himself.
'So vain' he whispered.
'Am not!' Ramana cried indignantly sitting up.

'Shhhhh' Farrell voiced, pushing her gently back onto the bed. 'Don't be so loud, you'll ruin the peace.'
Ramana flumped back onto the bed.
As they rested, Farrell held her close. Ramana's skin was burning hot; it was as if her body was aflame.
'Are you alright?' Farrell asked her concerned. 'You're boiling hot.'
Ramana took a deep breath, closing her eyes. It may have been a draft, or the fact that they had stilled now, but her skin suddenly seemed to cool.

Oh Ramana…. Farrell grieved. *My love…….my poor love……. what have I done to you……to us…?*

Ramana……I'm so sorry….

That night, as they slept in the cave, Farrell dreamed of her again.

'Why don't you play outside?' Ramana suggested.
'But why?'
Ramana slapped him lightly, smearing bright pink paint across his face.
'Now look at the mess you've made' she said laughing at him. 'You look like a jester!'
'Me?' Farrell said indignantly back at her, reaching for a pot of paint behind him. 'What about you?!' he threw the paint at her, but missed.
'Heads up!' Ramana called suddenly from above him.
Farrell jerked his head up to the balcony above, just as an entire content of a paint pot fell over his head.
'Dam you woman!' he bellowed, wiping the blue from his eyes. 'What is the matter with you?'
He was vaguely aware of a bird chirping loudly and running around in circles nearby, but when he cleared his eyes, he saw neither the bird nor Ramana.
Everything was silent, and he no longer stood in his home, but outside, in woodland.
He was no longer covered in paint.
He was alone, save for one figure, standing facing away from him.
He couldn't see the shadowy figure clearly, but in his dream, he somehow knew it was a young woman, with long black hair.
She turned to him, face hidden by the darkness of the cave that suddenly began to materialize around them.
'Find me…'

He woke with a start. The others were still asleep.
Farrell lay back down, taking slow and steady breaths. Alone with his thoughts he remained for several hours, until one of the mercenaries beside him woke. Shortly after, the others began to rise also, and the faint morning light reached them from the mouth of the cave. And as the sun climbed higher in the sky, Flunkit returned to them.
'The men are still out there' he told the others. 'They are circling the forest, looking for our trail.'

Chapter Twenty-Eight
A Knife in the Dark

'So' Woodworm began, summing up their predicament, 'we've barely started our quest, and we're somehow worse off than when we began. We're no closer to finding the *real* Amaia, and we have somehow gotten ourselves into a situation where we are hunted by none

other……then the frikkin prince *himself*. How the fuck did we manage to fuck up so badly so early on?'
'We couldn't have known it was him' Flunkit reasoned.
'This is all your fault' Woodworm shot at him. 'If you hadn't fired the first arrow then we wouldn't be in this mess.'
'Me?' Flunkit replied defensively.
'We should have just left her there' Woodworm glared at Annabel.
She glared fearfully back at him, having quickly learnt that Woodworm was not to be trusted, she kept her distance from all of them, especially him.
'And let her be taken by those men?' Shawn said rising to the bait. 'Why don't you just shut your fucking mouth?'
Woodworm began to growl at him, standing slowly and turning in his direction as if preparing to fight.
'Gods will you two just give it a rest?' Arlen said loudly, sighing into his hand. 'I'm fed up with the both of you.'
'How long do we have to stay here?' Annabel spoke up, hating the fact that the others were arguing over her, she tried to draw attention elsewhere.
Woodworm and Shawn relaxed slightly, their attention taken off one another as they became distracted.
'I don't think it's safe to stay here anymore' Carrot said. 'Those men will surely pick up our trail now that the sun is rising……it's only a matter of time.'
'I think we should go deeper into the cave' Blunkit suggested. 'There is a way through, the cave opens up elsewhere. If those men are looking for us, they have more chance of finding us if we stay here.'
'But we're running out of food' Farrell told him.
'It's ok' Flunkit replied. 'I could return to the village we came from. I could go back and get us something to last the journey to the next town or village we come across.'
'We can't stay here if we risk being found' Farrell argued.
'It ok' Flunkit said again. 'I know the way through this cave. I will find you again.'
'But we can't wait for you' Arlen said.
'We won't have to' Blunkit told him. 'I know the way through. I will lead you.'
Farrell glanced doubtfully towards Flunkit.
'Don't worry' Flunkit beamed encouragingly, 'my brother and I have been through this cave many times. We know these lands better than most.'
'You're brothers?' Farrell raised an eyebrow.
'Oh, did we not mention it before?' Blunkit asked obviously, knowing full well that he hadn't.
'I should have known' Farrell said turning to Barrel. 'Naming them Blunkit and Flunkit. Of course they had to be brothers.'
Barrel just smirked knowingly back at him.
'I'll be as quick as I can' Flunkit said rising.
He took some money and a few bare essentials, mounting one of the horses and riding at a trot, the horse flicking its tail and tossing its head as it went. Flunkit was quickly swallowed by the light shining at the mouth of the tunnel.

‘We had better get a move on’ Blunkit told the others.
‘Can we get through here with the horses?’ Arlen asked him.
‘Just about’ Blunkit replied. ‘But our pace will be slow.’
‘What if the others catch us?’ Shawn asked.
‘Oh, don’t worry’ Blunkit smiled. ‘My brother will sort that out.’
They packed their things away quickly and loaded the horses. Shortly after, they were walking at a gentle pace through the cave, led by the fire Annabel had summoned in her hand; they were able to see where they stepped.
‘That’s just incredible’ Flute Stick said as they witnessed her magic for a second time.
‘It’s lucky you're able to do that’ Carrot remarked. ‘Just what we need. What are the odds?’
‘Fire is an obvious element for Weather Makers’ Annabel answered curtly. ‘Most Weather Makers have this ability.’
‘I wonder what people would give to be able to do something like that’ Flute Stick said, staring at Annabel hungrily.
Annabel turned her eyes away from him uncomfortably as they walked.
‘I don’t think…’ Annabel went on, ‘that could ever happen. We cannot pass on our powers to others, only our children, and only girls.’
‘Hmm’ Flute Stick sighed mournfully. ‘That’s a shame.’

Several hours later, they sat down to rest. The horses were led to one of the many shallow pools scattered throughout the cave, and allowed to drink. They rested standing up. The other members of the troupe unloaded the bags the horses carried, but kept them saddled. Annabel observed as they each rolled out their sleeping mats, lying down to sleep or preparing something to eat, all the while, holding the burning flame in her hand as she did so. She had been keeping this fire burning since they descended into the cave, and the effort of keeping it alight was exhausting for her.
She kept her distance from the others as she sat and watched, a short time later, Shawn approached her, again offering his own sleeping mat for her to use. They had after all, taken her at short notice, and she had nothing with her but the clothes she wore.
‘That’s very kind of you’ Annabel said. ‘But what about you?’
‘I’ll use Flunkit’s’ Shawn replied. ‘He left it behind when he left us. Are you hungry?’
‘No’ Annabel shook her head.
‘Are you sure? You haven’t eaten at all since you’ve been with us.’
‘It’s hard to feel hungry when you've been suddenly put into this kind of situation.’
‘I'm sorry’ Shawn said. ‘None of us meant for this to happen.’
‘Maybe I should be thanking you’ Annabel said. ‘I don’t know what those men would have done to me if they succeeded in taking me.’
‘I wouldn’t exactly say you're well off here with us’ Shawn replied, considering the burley mercenaries behind them. Some of them were already snoring loudly as they slept.
‘I feel like they view me as a piece of meat’ Annabel admitted.
‘They probably do.’
‘I……I wanted to thank you for sticking up for me. I don’t really know who you are or what's going on, but you’ve been kind to me.’
‘Any *decent* man would have done the same.’

‘But we are not in a world filled with decent men’ she replied. ‘Are we?’
Shawn smiled at that.
‘You should get some rest’ he said to her.
‘Well…’ Annabel bowed her head. ‘I’ll try at least.’
He left her there, returning to the other mercenary’s and pulling out his own sleeping mat to lie on. Annabel at last released her magic, the fire went out, and the cave fell into complete and utter darkness.

Sometime later, Farrell woke. The dreams he was experiencing had become as familiar to him as he own heartbeat.
He didn’t know if it had been hours, or mere minutes, but the last thing that stayed with him from the dream that was quickly slipping from his memory, were the woods that were beginning to haunt him, and the voice which called out to him.
‘Find me…’
He drew a heavy sigh, closing his eyes again. Though it made little different in the darkness of the cave.
He sat there for the longest time, willing himself to doze off again. The others around him were still, some of the mercenaries snoring heavily in their sleep. He was about to drift off again, when he heard one of the bodies moving nearby.
Farrell’s mind became more aware as he listened. He didn’t know who it was, but one of the men around him had risen. Farrell saw the dim glow of a white light, held a hand of one of the mercenaries. He wondered what it was, and where the mercenary was going. He decided that perhaps he was going to relieve himself, but as the minutes ticked on, Farrell realised this could not have been the case.

The mercenary was gone for a long while, but Farrell waited nonetheless, staying awake to see when he would return and for how long he would be gone. When he finally did return, he did so quietly, and made to lay back down on his matt as if nothing had happened. But then he noticed Farrell watching him.
Blunkit smiled, letting out a deep sigh as he lay back down.
‘My skills must be fading in my old age’ he said. ‘I never used to wake people when I went off to do a job.’
‘What were you doing?’ Farrell asked him in a whisper as he sat up, leaning on his one good arm. The splint he was endured to wear was becoming tiresome.
Blunkit wore a strange expression to his question.
‘Isn’t it obvious?’
Farrell just stared back.
Blunkit cleared his throat, quietly so as not to bother the others still sleeping.
‘I was eh…’ he said, ‘fixing a problem. Don’t you worry; the prince won’t be coming after us now. Don’t worry I didn’t kill him’ Blunkit added hastily at the expression on his face. ‘I just…disabled his soldiers.’
‘Disabled’ Farrell echoed flatly.
‘Yup’ Blunkit replied cheerily. ‘Dead men aren’t much good at anything really, are they?’
He sat up on his mat with a smile.

‘Sooo’ Farrell went on. ‘You're an assassin?’
‘Yeah’ Blunkit replied casually. ‘I'm not as good as I used to be though.’
Farrell glanced sideways at him. Blunkit was by no means fat, but he wasn’t exactly lean either, his skin was well worn and there were flecks of grey in his hair and beard.
‘What's that thing you carry?’ Farrell asked him, indicating the glow of light that dimly lit up both their faces.
‘Oh’ Blunkit said. He drew it out to show Farrell. It looked like a small pebble. Though it wasn’t anything natural, it was emitting a strange white light. ‘This…’ Blunkit said. ‘This is just a silly little thing. It’s a rare item the king gives out to his most trusted assassins. It’s nothing special really; it’s just a small stone that glows. It never seems to lose its power.’
‘Nothing special?’ Farrell repeated, examining it as Blunkit held it out for him to take. ‘Most I'm sure would disagree.’
The object was small, and was smooth as he rubbed it between his fingers.
‘The white ones are especially rare’ Blunkit went on. ‘Most you get are a greenish-blue in colour.’
Farrell remembered something then. Years ago, when he had been asked by the king to search for some strange creature underground, he remembered how the walls themselves seemed to glow a strange sickly greenish-blue, in the otherwise light-less tunnel.
‘You must have been very special to the king to be given a white one if they're that rare.’
‘Nah’ Blunkit smirked taking it back. ‘I stole it.’
‘Oh.’
‘Well’ Blunkit shrugged. ‘I took it from another assassin I killed. He didn’t need it. I guess it doesn’t count so much as stealing if the other guy’s dead right? His fault for letting his guard down.’
‘Right’ Farrell replied unconvinced.
‘The king should have chosen a better man to give such a gift to’ Blunkit went on.
‘Are you ok with killing the prince’s men if you work for the king?’ Farrell asked him.
‘Oh, I don’t work for the king anymore’ Blunkit shook his head. ‘I'm too old now. I haven’t worked for the king for a long time.’
‘How did you come to be in his services?’
‘Well’ Blunkit grinned widely. ‘That is a story that began a long time ago. My brother and I…in the beginning we lived a very comfortable life. My father…he was a big fancy man. I wasn’t sure back then exactly what he did, but now looking back I think he was probably a merchant or something. He had a lot of money, and we lived an easy life. My mother was a very beautiful woman, every day she wore the most beautiful rings and gems and jewels. I remember both my parents always dressed finely. My brother and I would always get the best of everything, we were the envy of our friends; oh, it was a good feeling.’ He smiled to himself as he lay back down and stretched out on the matt. ‘Our house was large, we had courtyards and gardens and pools…I remember how our home was always busy. There was just me and my brother and my parents, but my father would always have people walking around the house. They must have been men he worked with I suppose, he spent a lot of time in his office talking about money and making deals me and my brother didn’t understand. We were intrigued. Some days we would creep about trying to listen to the things he said to these strangers that always came to the house. But we were young and got bored of that very

quickly. Besides we didn't understand what he was talking about anyway.' Blunkit nodded to himself. 'Life was good.'
'So what happened?' Farrell asked.
'What happened?' Blunkit repeated. 'I'm not entirely sure. *Something* happened one day that changed everything. I remember my parents arguing over something, it was strange, our parents never argued. At least not like that. I remember me and my brother listening through the door and peering through the keyhole. Both our parents seemed frightened. I think perhaps my father got into money problems. Borrowed from the wrong people and couldn't pay back…that sort of thing. Anyway…' he shrugged. 'That night, my father came to our bedroom after our mother had put us to bed. He said he was going to read us a bedtime story, which was strange, because he never did that before. It was always our mother who read us stories. And I remember…. thinking how he didn't seem himself. He seemed nervous. Scared. He said to me and my brother, that he loved the both of us very much, and that we meant the world to him, which was also out of character. Then…a short time later when he was nearing the end of the story, he slumped forwards, falling on my brother's bed. It took a few seconds for us to realise he was dead. There was a feathered dart in the back of his neck. It was bright red.'
'He was murdered?'
'Yes' Blunkit nodded. 'He was assassinated. And you know what the strangest thing is?'
'What?'
'We never saw the assassin.'
Farrell waited silently for him to continue.
'We moved house after that, mother was distraught, and a few years later, life returned to what could be called normal, though we weren't as well off for money, and my mother was never the same again. Me and my brother lived our normal lives, forgetting the incident in which our father had died, until the day we were specially selected to fight in the king's army.'
'Specially selected?' Farrell said. 'That doesn't happen very often. You must have been good.'
'Well…' Blunkit shrugged. 'I was young and fit and liked to fight. Got into trouble all the time with people, and my first instinct was the throw a punch. We lived in a big town and there were a lot of jerks who lived nearby. Oh, it used to upset mother dearly, especially when Finlay started doing the same. The number of times we came home with black eyes and various other wounds we couldn't explain to her. We just got noticed one day by the right people.'
'Finlay? Is that Flunkit's real name?'
Blunkit smirked. 'Yeah, and my real name's Brandon. Anyway, we began our training, it was tough, but I think the men in charge had other plans for us. We were sent on a suicide mission, but miraculously me and my brother survived. It was a gruesome scene; there was blood everywhere, bright red and freshly flowing. And then I remembered, that bright red dart sticking out of my father's neck, and then I thought to myself……if I'm going to risk my life doing dangerous shit, I may as well make it worthwhile. When I told the men in charge I wanted to be an assassin, they were surprised. But due to the skills and ability to survive that me and my brother seemed to possess, we were accepted into the king's Secret Army, and

trained as assassins. We were trained for years, and were tested all the time. But do you know what our final test was?'
'No?'
'I thought it would be really difficult. Some complicated plan to infiltrate some high security place and kill some fancy man and get out again unseen but no. It wasn't what I thought it would be…not at all…'
'What was it?' Farrell asked.
'It was difficult, but the test was a lot simpler than I anticipated. An assassin must be ruthless, heartless. Cold. Our final test…was to murder an innocent child.'
Farrell's heart skipped a beat as he listened, new emotions washing over him as he considered this stranger. 'Who was the child?'
'Dunno' Blunkit shrugged. 'Some poor victim. Probably the child of one of our previous targets we had to kill. Gods he was young, and so very frightened.'
'And did you do it?'
'Had to. Had no choice.' Blunkit shrugged again carelessly as if it were of no consequence. 'For years we worked as assassins' he went on. 'Until we got too old. Now me and my brother are mercenaries.' Blunkit glanced towards Farrell. 'We never did find out how the story our father told us ended.'
'If you had such a good life back at home then why did you leave?
'It wasn't fitting our needs' Blunkit shrugged. 'Buying pretty clothes and being waited on is nice, but seeing a man tremble in fear and wet himself at the sight of you, knowing the end is coming…well…nothing beats that feeling. It's almost…godlike…to have that kind of power.' He breathed deeply, as if the memories brought him pleasure.
'I'm surprised you want to tell me all of this' Farrell noted.
'Well' Blunkit waved at him. 'I've lived far longer than many assassins have, my brother too. I suppose someone may as well hear my story before I die.' He smirked. 'What about you then?' Blunkit asked turning to him. 'What's your story?'
'Hm' Farrell frowned. 'I'm afraid…it's not a very nice story.'
'We all have a dark mark in our past. Just remember not to let it shadow your future.'
Farrell glanced up at Blunkit, surprised by such words.
'Hey' Blunkit snickered gleefully. 'The prince should be waking soon. Oh, how I wish I was there to see the look on his face when he finds out what happened to his men.'
Farrell raised an eyebrow, but he didn't ask what Blunkit had done to them.
He thought of the prince then, and remembered the strange look he had given him when they had met. It was unsettling the way he had looked at each of their faces in turn, remembering them, but when he looked at Farrell, a flicker of recognition crossed his expression. Farrell wondered who he was, and if he had met him before.
Never mind he thought as he lay down to rest. *It will come to me in time.*

The prince woke at some point. It was forever dark inside the cave, and was impossible to tell what time of day or night it was. Nevertheless, Tristan felt he has overslept. However it was not the passage of time that had woken him, but a damp feeling that had touched his skin.

Tristan sat up, feeling an uneasy sensation in his heart. He wanted to call out to the others, but some instinct inside him stopped him from doing so. He reached into his bags, feeling around in the dark for what he needed. He lit a fire. It took him several attempts to light the torch, and when he did, the sight that greeted him was an unwelcome one.

Every single one of his men were dead, their throats slit while they slept, their blood seeping into the pools within the caves. They would never know what happened to them. Would never know who killed them. *This* Tristan thought, *could only be the work of an assassin. To kill men while they sleep is not the soldier's way*.

Alone now, save for his horse, he shouldered his bag and retreated, heading through the cave, and back the way he had come. He left the other horses where they were. They would find their way; they were free from their masters now.

When Tristan found at last the path of light that led back into the open world, he was met by a small band of his soldiers that he had previously ordered to follow after him.

'Do we continue to pursue them?' one of his soldiers asked him.

'No' Tristan shook his head. 'We return home.'

'We do not pursue the target?'

'No' Tristan replied again, staring back into the cave. 'I do not think she is the one I'm looking for.'

'Where are the other men?' the soldier asked.

Tristan lowered his eyes.

'We return home' Tristan repeated, turning back to the soldier who spoke. 'Gather the men. I don't want to spend another night sleeping either under stars or upon rocks.'

'Yes, your highness.'

Free now from the uneven cave floor, Tristan mounted his horse. He followed his men as they headed back where they had come from, walking at the back of the group. But something was on his mind that troubled him, a thought he could not shake.

That man he thought. *I know him from somewhere. But where? Who is he?*

Chapter Twenty-Nine
Revelation

It took many days of slow travel to reach the other side of the cave, and the journey was long and arduous. In the time it took them to get there, their supplies had dwindled. Barrel was becoming insufferable and annoyed everyone, especially Woodworm. All of them were getting tired of the dark, and Annabel was becoming weary with summoning fire all the time. It was of little effort to perform this spell, but to keep it up for many hours was exhausting her.

When Blunkit told the others their food had run out altogether, Barrel had begun to laugh uncontrollably, causing Woodworm to lose his temper and wrestled him to the ground.

Woodworm then proceeded to attempted to force several different objects in his mouth to shut him up, one of which was a frying pan.
The next time the group lay down to rest, Flute Stick had woken up screaming and thrashing in terror. Carrot rushed over to him, it took several seconds to calm him, but eventually Flute Stick relaxed.
Flute Stick didn't sleep much after that, none of them did. When they did at last see the first glimmer of natural light, it was a wonderful feeling for all of them, even the horses seemed relieved. Barrel ran ahead of the others to stand in the fresh air, he lifted his head high, the wind ruffled his hair, the sun shone off the scar that covered half his face. All of the others increased their steps as they neared the mouth of the cave.
'Oh, it feels good to breathe the fresh air again' Shawn sighed when he had stepped out into the sun.
Seeing their arrival, a figure stepped out from the bushes to join them, smiling widely. It was Flunkit, and he was carrying bags full of food.

The group stopped to rest near the entrance of the cave. The first thing that Arlen did when they sat down; was to apply the dark paint around his eyes again.
For some reason this deeply saddened Farrell, and as he watched his brother change before him, he couldn't help but feel that Arlen did these things to hide. From others and from himself, like a mask to face the outside world. Even the beard Arlen had grown looked odd to Farrell, and he didn't think it suited Arlen, not at all.
It was evening, and the sky would be growing dark soon. Shawn went off to find firewood, while the others continued to gorge themselves on food.
Arlen sat away from the others as usual, resting on the other side of the shallow river they had come to.
'So' Barrel sang merrily around a mouthful of food. 'What happens when we find Amaia?' he asked the two brothers loudly. 'Who will take her home?'
'I will take her and keep her safe' Arlen spoke up automatically.
'The fuck you are.'
Arlen very slowly turned his head towards Farrell, expression level.
'She will be safer with me' Arlen said.
'I raised her. I'm her father. She's staying with me.'
Arlen rose to his feet, his hand on his weapon.
'You have already proven once you are not fit to care for her. I won't allow that mistake to happen again.'
'Won't allow?' Farrell scoffed. 'You have no say in anything concerning her.'
Arlen hunched his body suddenly, a raging inferno rapidly burning within him.
'No say?!' he repeated trembling with fury. 'I have more say than you deserve!'
Farrell took a step back. The expression that Arlen wore now could be described as no less than demonic. The hatred within him was like nothing Farrell had ever seen before.
'You are not my brother' Farrell shook his head. 'My brother would never act this way, speak this way or chose to paint himself this way…my brother died a long time ago. You are nothing but his shell. You are someone else. I do not know you.'

Arlen smiled then. A crooked and evil smile. His muscles hard like rock, his broken nose and the scars that lined his flesh all showed of the past battles he had fought, the hard life he had endured.
‘Kill me then’ Arlen snarled, ‘and I will try to do the same to you.’
Farrell slumped his shoulders, slowly drawing his sword, resigned to his task.
‘Very well’ he spoke with regret. ‘Now, one of us will die.’
Arlen drew sword swiftly from his sheath, causing it to sing.
The brothers slowly approached each other, weapons at the ready. Farrell wading into the knee-high river, Arlen descending the slope of the hill on the other side and heading towards the water, fixated on Farrell as he moved forwards.
‘Isn’t anyone going to stop them?’ Annabel urged the others, voice trembling.
‘Why?’ Flute Stick asked flatly. He had stopped what he was doing to watch the two figures about to fight; the other mercenaries had done the same.
‘They will kill each other’ Annabel cried.
‘So?’ Carrot replied.
Barrel rested his chin on his hand, sniggering to himself gleefully.
Farrell and Arlen struck their first blow, swords clashing in the air.
Annabel turned on her heel and ran into the woods. None of the mercenaries paid her any attention as she fled.
‘Shawn!’ she called desperately, running in the direction he had gone.
Stumbling over hidden roots and fallen trees, she cut her knees and tore her dress, but still forced herself onwards until she was out of breath. She did not stop running, and did not stop calling, until she found him.
‘What is it?’ Shawn asked her urgently, seeing the distress and fear in her.
‘They’re fighting’ Annabel gasped, unable to say anymore, doubled over with her hands on her knees. ‘They're fighting!’
Shawn dropped the firewood he had collected, grabbing her by the wrist and running back to camp, Annabel was dragged after him, struggled to keep up.

Arlen had been disarmed. He rounded on Farrell, eyes bloodshot red with pure rage. He grabbed the blade with his bare hands before Farrell had a chance to swing. Farrell instantly drew the sword back, blood from Arlen’s fingers showered down into the river below, staining the water. But Arlen didn’t even seem to notice. He stepped towards Farrell dangerously, unarmed, without armour. He was fearless. But this time Farrell did not hesitate. He made a start towards Arlen with the intention to strike him.
Arlen charged forwards to meet him, grabbing the pommel of Farrell’s sword before he could strike and in one swift action, twisted the hilt out of his grip before he had a chance to swing it. But instead of using it to kill him, Arlen threw Farrell’s sword away into the waters. Farrell would never find it in time to protect himself. Arlen now fought in a way that had become most familiar to him over the years. He fought with bare flesh, a savage and brutal way that was born of the streets, in close combat, with no honour and no rules. Arlen rained blows down upon Farrell, Farrell staggered back until he chanced the moment he was able to duck

quickly, and grab a rock from the river bed. Lifting it high he cut across Arlen's temple, causing him to see stars. Dazed, Arlen stumbled. Farrell took his chance, tripping him, and throwing him into the water.
Farrell pushed down hard, keeping Arlen below the surface. His brother's face staring back at him from below the water as he struggled to free himself from Farrell's weight. Seconds passed, and Farrell could see Arlen beginning to panic now as he slowly ran out of breath. He let go of Farrell's arms, instead fumbling on his person, perhaps looking for a weapon in which to defend himself. But he would never find one in time to save himself.
Arlen would have died, had there not been one to intervene.
Shawn suddenly grabbed Farrell from behind, pulling him back. Farrell tried to pull away from him, attempting to lunge forward, hands pawing at the air to get to Arlen again.
'Let go of me! He snarled. 'I have to kill him!'
'At what cost?' Shawn hollered back still holding him.
Arlen sat up quickly, breaking the surface of the water and drawing a deep gasp of air. He would have lunged for Farrell had he been able. Had he been able, he would have attacked Farrell at the first opportunity. But something held him down. Vines that had grown up from the earth and through the water suddenly and swiftly wrapped themselves around his arms and legs as he made to stand. There were many of them, and he couldn't pull away. Arlen's attention shot to the river bank, where Annabel stood.
'Don't struggle' Annabel told him calmly, 'you won't break free.'
'Farrell' Shawn gasped, still holding his arms back. 'I'm going to let you go, please don't hurt him.'
Farrell's shoulders heaved, chest rising and falling as he drew deep breaths, exhausted from the fight and rage he had endured.
Behind him, Shawn slowly relaxed his grip, and let go. Annabel too withdrew her power, and the vines retreated back into the earth they had come from. Arlen slowly rose, glaring daggers at Farrell, his eyes still bloodshot red. Farrell returned his steady gaze.
'What has gotten into you two?' Shawn demanded.
'This new person is an insult to the brother I once knew' Farrell replied flatly.
'You are the insult' Arlen countered in a deadly whisper, his voice shaking in anger. 'You're a failure as a father and a husband and a brother.'
'So you try to kill each other?!' Shawn cried out desperately, looking from one to the other. 'Is that what Amaia would want?'
Farrell and Arlen remained still, each locked in stares.
'Think of how Amaia would feel if she realised she has lost yet another?' Shawn snapped angrily. 'She needs *both* of you now more than ever. She has already suffered enough.'
Farrell and Arlen still did not move.
'Please' Shawn groaned, voice quieting now. 'Enough…'
Arlen turned on his heel and strode away through the water, walking away. Farrell in turn relaxed, taking a step back.

'Good lord' Carrot said in his thick accent as he stitched Arlen's flesh back together where the sword had cut the inside of his fingers. 'It's a wonder you didn't lose them altogether.'

‘Or how you were able to carry on fighting’ Blunkit added, handing Carrot a roll of bandage.
Arlen sat quietly as the two worked on his injuries, sowing together the deep gashes and tending to his other wounds. He didn’t flinch as the needle passed through his skin again and again.
A distance away from him Farrell sat. He could already feel his throbbing body coming out in bruises where Arlen had beaten him, and a quick exam had revealed that he had re-broken his arm. He hadn’t even noticed the pain of all his aliments at the time, but now, they came at him in full force.
Farrell grimaced, jerking his leg back as Annabel applied some ointment to a deep cut on his thigh.
‘I'm sorry’ Annabel replied meekly. ‘Flunkit said this might sting a bit, but it would make you better.’
She pressed the damp cloth to the seeping wound again, and this time, he didn’t flinch.
‘Are you alright?’ Shawn asked him quietly, sitting next to him.
‘Hm’ Farrell replied, feeling thoroughly depressed.
‘I've been speaking with the others’ Shawn went on. ‘We’ve decided to head to Hexham. It’s the nearest town from here, the others want to stop and rest and gather food and supplies. Besides, I think Annabel needs a decent place to sleep at least for one night.’
She glanced at him, smiling gratefully.
‘We’re leaving soon’ he told Farrell briefly, before getting up and moving away.

A short time later, and they were slowly making their way upstream to the town of Hexham.
‘Why do you two fight so terribly?’ Annabel asked Farrell beside her as he walked alongside his horse. It was rocky in this area beside the river, so the group made their way on foot, leading the horses beside them.
Farrell sighed, glancing forwards at Arlen who walked ahead of them.
‘He is angry for what I've done.’
‘And what have you done?’ Annabel asked.
‘It was my negligence that put us in this mess in the first place. If it wasn’t for me, I could still be living in my old home, with my wife by my side, my daughter, and perhaps more children. But…’ he broke off.
‘What happened?’
‘My wife was murdered, on the same day my daughter was stolen.’
Annabel’s eyes grew wide. ‘You are looking for her. That’s why you came to my village.’
‘You have the same long dark hair she had’ Farrell said turning to her. ‘The same dark hair her mother…’ he turned away again.
‘I know how you must feel’ Annabel told him quietly. ‘I too have lost a loved one. My brother…. he…died a long time ago.’
‘What happened?’
‘There’s not much to say really. We were very close.’
‘We should get you some new clothes’ Farrell said quickly changing the subject as he looked her up and down, before facing ahead again. ‘You might be travelling with us for some time.’
Annabel said no more.

When Tristan returned home, he separated himself from his soldiers, leaving them to carry on with their own business. He was tired, exhausted in fact, wanting only to rest and let his mind become at ease. But the first thing that happened when he entered his home, was that he was greeted by his wife. 'The annoying woman' as he secretly called her; but only in his head, he never spoke this out loud. He could never after all be sure where she was lurking.

She appeared before him, wearing a very beautiful, very expensive-looking blue dress. The shoulders were left bare, and there was a great white strip running down the front in which was very intricately detailed, the depiction of a great dragon, coloured white and shades of blue. It was of a foreign design.

'Where did you get that?' Tristan spoke in a tone of displeasure.

'Do you like it?' Olithia asked him, giggling like a playful child. She looked very beautiful with her blonde hair curled into ringlets and falling about her shoulders. She gave a twirl for him. 'Isn't it beautiful?'

Tristan didn't even bother trying to suppress his groan as he buried his face a hand.

'Goddamit woman…. I'm not an endless pit of money.'

She smiled sweetly at him, not in the least bit put off.

'My dear husband' she cooed sarcastically. 'What good is it being married to a prince if I can't spoil myself?'

Tristan lifted his head, glaring daggers at her; he could feel his blood pressure growing ever higher.

'Fine' she sighed, dropping her playful tone and moving away from him. 'Eat your food, the servants have just cooked. If you don't eat it soon it'll cool. Not that I care…' she finished, turning her head away dismissively and speaking to the wall.

She clicked her fingers as she left. Her handmaiden, who followed her almost everywhere rushed up to her, walking behind her with her hands together and head bowed.

The two left the room.

Tristan dismissed the other servants who lingered, wishing only to be alone at this time.

He wandered through his home and to the dining room, sitting down heavily in one of the ornate seats; elbow leant upon the arm of the chair, chin resting on his closed fist. The food that had been placed before him looked fresh, looked delicious. But he ignored it.

Instead he took another deep breath, trying to calm the raging storm within him.

'Hateful woman' he whispered to himself.

He turned his thoughts away from his wife, and thought again of that man he had seen, the one he could not get out of his mind.

He closed his eyes, brow furrowed as he tried desperately to think.

It was many minutes he sat there. And then it hit him all of a sudden.

'Gods alive!' he cried out loud, sitting bolt upright.

'Husband?' a voice sailed from the next room. 'Is everything alright?'

Tristan flinched, quickly glancing in the direction his wife's voice had come from, before rising from his seat and running in the opposite direction and into the next room to find his guards.

'Get on your horses' he told a group of them in a hushed voice as he ran past.

‘But we only just got here your highness.’
‘I don’t care’ Tristan snapped back. ‘I want you to search all the towns and villages nearest the exit of that cave. We have to find him.’
He left the house seconds later with his men, before his wife had a chance to hinder him.
By the time Olithia spotted him through one of the windows in an upstairs room, he was nothing more than a speck growing smaller on the horizon.

It was an uneventful journey from then on, from the river near the mouth of the cave, to the town called Hexham where they headed. Most of the time the group walked in complete silence, save for Shawn and Annabel. They talked quietly to each most of the way, speaking in animated whispers, and smiling to one another.
The town when they reached it was dingy and unremarkable, but not as miserable and depressing as the first town Farrell and Shawn had entered, back when they had set out to find Arlen. Hexham was nowhere near as glum as Stonegate.
They found themselves an inn at the edge of the town where they could rest and eat and buy more supplies. Annabel, when they had been shown their rooms, instantly collapsed on one of the beds. Lying on her front and burying her face in the pillows and the sheets.
‘Soft…’ she mumbled hugging the bed.
‘We’re to be sharing a room together’ Shawn told her, leaning on the doorframe.
Behind him the others walked back and forth in the corridors, examining their own rooms, unpacking their things and lounging around happily.
‘Together?’ Annabel repeated, pushing herself off the bed and facing him.
‘I …’ Shawn began awkwardly. ‘I asked the innkeeper for it to be this way. There are no single rooms here and…. well…I didn’t want you to…. you know…. the others…’
‘I understand’ Annabel said smiling at him. ‘Thank you.’
He smiled back at her, visibly relaxing and breathing a sigh of relief.
‘Thanks’ he said back to her. ‘I um…I'm going to…check on the others…’

Downstairs Farrell was wandering the tables around the bar.
‘Food is served at eight in the morning, twelve midday and six in the evening’ the barmaid droned as she slouched around clearing the tables. She was an older woman, fat with grey hair tied tightly back. ‘If you miss those times, then too bad. The kitchen will be closed and the cook will not be coming back in.’
‘I understand’ Farrell replied. ‘Hey listen, can I ask you a question?’
‘As long as you make it quick.’
‘Are there any dress shops around here? I have a friend who needs some new clothes.’
‘You mean that pretty little girl your lot came in with?’ the lady asked. ‘I'm not even going to ask what you’re doing with her. There is a shop that makes custom clothes near here, it’s a bit expensive, but whatever she comes out with, it’s got to be a dam sight better than those drab clothes she’s wearing now. Who is she anyway? Did you kidnap her? She looks too young to be a prostitute. Or maybe she is. Or maybe she’s one of your daughters. What's she doing here and not at home? Where is her mother?’

‘Thank you’ Farrell said loudly cutting her off before she could continue. ‘Could you give me directions to this shop?’

‘Annabel!’ Arlen called. ‘Hurry up.’
‘I'm coming’ Annabel answered.
She came rushing down the stairs to join Arlen, Farrell and Shawn who were waiting for her.
‘I'm here’ she declared. ‘So where are we going?’
‘To get you some new clothes’ Shawn told her.
‘I don’t have any money.’
‘Don’t worry about that’ Shawn laughed. ‘We’ll pay for whatever you need. You get yourself something nice.’
‘So why are *they* coming?’ Annabel asked Shawn, glancing from Arlen to Farrell.
‘I'm carrying the money’ Farrell said.
‘And I can’t stand being around the others’ Arlen added. ‘Especially Barrel…he is so annoying.’
‘Come on then’ Farrell said to them. ‘It’s this way.’

The shop they entered was small, situated on a quiet street away from the main roads. The men were ushered out of the shop after they had told the ladies what they wanted, and Annabel was taken away to be measured.
Over an agonizing hour later, in which the three men sat in almost complete and awkward silence, Annabel finally emerged.
She wore a long, black, grey and white dress, many layered and laced at the front in a thick black ribbon. Her long dark hair was held back by a thick black band, her fringe left uneven hung over her forehead.
‘Wow’ Farrell said. ‘You look…older.’
‘Is that good?’ she asked him tentatively.
‘You look wonderful’ Shawn told her.
She smiled at him briefly, before turning gloomy.
‘What's wrong?’ Shawn asked.
‘It’s just…I just miss my parents so much. I feel sad that I might never see them again…and they might never know what happened to me.’
‘Don’t worry’ Shawn spoke softly, squeezing her shoulders reassuringly. ‘You're safe with us, for the meantime at least. And there is no reason your parents would be in danger. You will see them again, I'm sure of it.’
She smiled at him again, this time with more enthusiasm.
‘We should get back to the inn’ Arlen said unfolded his arms. ‘It’s getting late.’
The small group moved off. Walking slowly for a few minutes, they rounded a corner, and pulled back in shock and surprise at what they saw.
Standing before them beside his white horse, was the prince.
Annabel instinctively moved to stand behind the others, unconsciously holding onto Shawn’s arm as she did so.
‘Don’t worry’ the prince said confidently to her. ‘I have no interest in you anymore.’
‘But why?’ Annabel asked in a weak voice. ‘Why did you want me in the first place?’

‘I was looking for someone’ the prince replied. ‘But now…I don’t think you are the one I seek.’
‘Who are you looking for?’ Arlen asked suspiciously, hand resting on the pommel of his sword. ‘Tell me.’
Tristan ignored him, instead he spoke to Farrell.
‘You know me’ he said to him. ‘Don’t you?’
‘Your face does seem familiar’ Farrell admitted reluctantly. ‘But from where I have seen you, I do not recall.’
‘That’s because it was a long time ago’ he answered.
‘Tristan?’ Arlen spoke up.
‘You know me?’ Tristan replied, glancing towards him curiously. ‘I don’t know you.’
‘You do’ Arlen answered back. ‘I'm *his* brother’ he said pointing towards Farrell.
Tristan narrowed his eyes, staring hard at Arlen.
‘I do not recognise you.’
‘That’s because I have changed over the years. My name is Arlen.’
‘Arlen?’ Tristan spoke slowly. ‘*That* is really you? I would never have known. And Shawn’ he went on turning to him. ‘You’ve changed a lot, but I still recognise you. I'm sorry for what happened to your father.’
‘I met you on that day the king summoned us to find that great beast’ Farrell suddenly remembered.
Tristan nodded. ‘His name is Vendmil.’
‘That *thing* has a name?’ Arlen scoffed.
‘He belongs to my father’ Tristan explained. ‘My father named him.’
‘Why are you here?’ Farrell asked him suspiciously.
‘You are looking for Amaia aren’t you?’ the prince said.
Farrell felt a jolt in his heart. ‘Do you know where she is?’
‘No’ Tristan said quickly.
‘How do you know of her?’ Arlen asked Tristan.
‘Because she is my daughter.’

Chapter Thirty
Painful Memories

All three of the men stared open mouthed at him.
‘What?’ Arlen said shortly.
‘Amaia is my daughter’ Tristan repeated.
‘Have you *completely* lost your mind?’ Farrell demanded.
‘No’ Tristan groaned, rolling his eyes at him. ‘And I don’t appreciate your tone of voice.’
‘How can you possibly be her father?’ Shawn asked him.

‘Don’t bother trying to reason with him’ Farrell said back to Shawn. ‘He’s obviously delusional.’
‘You're right’ Arlen agreed. ‘He’s talking crap. Let’s just go.’
‘You weren’t there when she was born were you?’ Tristan called back to them as they made to walk away.
Farrell turned back to him.
‘I know all about Amaia. I watched her from a distance all her life as she grew; and I saw what happened on that day when Ramana was killed. That was…such a terrible tragedy.’
‘How do you know all of this?’ Farrell asked him.
‘Because’ Tristan answered. ‘I was the one who took her.’
In an instant Arlen was upon him. He had shoved him against the wall, the long blade of a knife pressed against Tristan’s throat.
‘Did you kill her?’ Arlen snarled.
‘No’ Tristan answered quickly, staring up into the sky as he tried to lean away from the blade, but to no avail. ‘My father’s men were responsible for her death.’
‘Then why did you take Amaia?’
‘To protect her.’
Arlen drew back from him, releasing the prince, but he did not put his knife away.
‘Dear dear’ Tristan said, straightening his clothes and rubbing his neck which trickled blood. ‘Temper temper.’
‘What do you mean by saying to protect her?’ Arlen asked.
‘Amaia is a Weather Maker. The king is kidnapping Weather Makers. One day one of his men saw Amaia use her magic; he sent a small group of soldiers out to collect her. That’s when I stepped in. I killed the men that had taken her, that had killed Ramana, and took Amaia myself. For years I kept her hidden, in that building you attacked. To protect her. But shortly before you came she escaped, to find you’ he said to Farrell.
‘Why is there a gravestone?’ Arlen asked.
Tristan sighed.
‘She was so devastated when she learnt that Ramana was dead, she jumped from one of the towers.’
‘And she didn’t die?’ Shawn asked incredulous.
‘Weather Makers have many powers’ Tristan replied simply.
‘She must have died’ Annabel spoke up suddenly. ‘If someone jumps from a tower to kill themselves…what are the odds of them failing to die?’
Tristan turned his eyes onto her.
‘You're being deceitful,’ she said bravely.
‘What makes you say that?’ Shawn asked her.
Annabel narrowed her eyes in thought. ‘He’s not telling you the full story. Weather Makers have more than one life. The number depends on the individual, but if a Weather Maker dies, then her body is reincarnated in another form. That is how you lost her isn’t it?’ she said to Tristan.
He just smiled quietly at her, resigned.
‘And I'm sorry’ Annabel said to the others, ‘but when a Weather Maker is reincarnated their appearance changes and they forget everything that happened to them before they died. I'm

sorry' she said again, 'but by the sound of it you probably won't recognise Amaia if you ever see her, and she won't remember any of you either.'
Arlen and Farrell fell silent as they both descended back into despair. Their task was becoming ever more impossible.
'How do you know about that?' Shawn asked Annabel unperturbed.
'Because' Annabel replied sadly. 'I have died before. I fell climbing and broke my neck. I was only able to find my parents again because of my brother. Through him I relearned my past.'
'So' Arlen said recovering. 'You want our help to find her because you've lost her.'
Tristan shrugged. 'More or less.'
'Why should we help you?' Farrell accused. 'You're the one who took her.'
'And lost her' Arlen added quickly.
'I took her for good reason' Tristan argued back, folding his arms.
'I'm going to make you pay for this' Farrell threatened. 'I'm going to kill you for what you've done.'
'And what have I done?' Tristan said in a level voice.
'You took her away from me; away from everything she knew and loved!'
Tristan's eyes flashed.
'You really think she was better off with you?'
Farrell fell silent.
'You've forgotten that day, haven't you?' Tristan retaliated. He unfolded his arms as he spoke, his body tensed. 'You've forgotten that day, when your wife tried to kill herself…'

'Come home now!' Amaia cried. 'You must come home, mother needs you!'
'Not now' Farrell groaned turning away from her.
'Her wrists are bleeding!' Amaia sobbed, grabbing him again, her black hair falling about her face. 'Please! Please help her!'

'*You'* Tristan glowered. 'You turned your back on your wife when she needed you the most. And after that tragic day, when she was killed and Amaia was missing…you didn't even bother to look for her.'
'I thought she was dead' Farrell mumbled, blinking back tears.
'You assumed' Tristan snarled. 'It was one of my father's men that stabbed Ramana…but it may as well have been *you* holding the sword.'
'No…' Farrell shook his head, stepping back.
'You caused this' Tristan went on. 'And for what? The memory of a man you could not save…Brice…your dead brother… It must have been a hard time for you. But Arlen…who had lost his brother also did not give into despair.' Tristan looked at him now, eyes deep. 'You looked for her; you searched for Amaia…for years…I know…' He looked back to Farrell, speaking to him now. 'I offer you a deal. We are both looking for her. We stand a better chance of finding her if we work together.'
'And what will happen if we find her?' Farrell asked him reluctantly. 'What will happen? Will you take her away from me again?'

‘I could give her a better life than you ever could’ Tristan answered coldly. ‘Just think about that.’
‘You're wrong’ Arlen spoke up. ‘For years she was happy.’
‘Just consider my offer’ Tristan spoke turning back to his horse. ‘My home is north of Blackrain, it’s easy enough to find…when you want to find me. I will wait for you there.’
He mounted his horse, and made a swift exit.
‘We shouldn’t trust him’ Annabel said when he had gone. ‘I don’t trust him…’
‘Farrell?’ Shawn spoke. ‘Are you ok?’
Farrell did not answer him. He just walked away in silence.

Chapter Thirty-One
Welcome Guests

For hours after that Farrell wandered alone outside the town, beyond its walls were there was little but wide-open plains. Annabel eventually ventured off alone to look for him. She found him easily enough.
‘Are you alright?’ she asked him.
‘What are you doing out here alone?’ Farrell replied without turning.
‘I was worried about you.’
‘Why?’
She went quiet.
‘I'm surprised you were allowed to come out here on your own’ he said. ‘You're too valuable to lose. A Weather Maker …’
‘The others don’t know I'm here’ Annabel answered.
He turned to her.
‘Don’t worry about me’ Annabel smiled. ‘If I am forced to, I can defend myself.’
He turned away from her again.
‘I’ve been having these strange dreams lately’ Farrell told her in a mumble, his voice sounding coarse as he spoke. ‘I thought that in time they would go away. But not only have they not gone away, they’ve gotten worse.’
‘What are these dreams?’
‘In these dreams, I see a young woman, standing in the woods with her back to me. When she turns, she speaks to me, saying the same words every time. *Find me*……’ Farrell bowed his head. ‘I don’t know why, but I feel…. I feel like I *know* it’s her. My daughter……Amaia…’
Farrell drew a slow breath to calm himself, balling his fists to stop his hands from shaking. ‘Now…I hear her voice in my head, I feel her presence beside me, as if she were standing there in the flesh’ he turned to look to the side of him as he spoke, and then away again. ‘I know she is not there, but each time I look, I feel as if I might see her.’
‘A spell has been placed upon you’ Annabel told him. ‘She wants you to find her.’
‘I can hear a whisper in my ear, even now. It may not be just my imagination. She’s out there somewhere, waiting to be found, to be brought home, and I'm going to find her.’

‘What are you going to do?’
‘This…*Tristan’* he spoke with a sneer. ‘He knows more than he’s letting on, and I'm going to find out what it is.’
‘What are you going to do?’ Annabel asked again, nervously now.
‘It’s ok’ Farrell said. ‘I've got a plan.’

‘That’s a stupid plan’ Woodworm said the second Farrell had finished explaining. ‘You're an idiot. That would never work.’
‘Why not?’ Farrell argued back, dejected.
‘Let me get this straight’ Flunkit began. ‘You want us to find where the prince Tristan lives, break into his home when he is not there, and find someone close to him to interrogate?’
‘He knows more than he’s telling’ Farrell urged. ‘I just know it.’
‘He does seem to be deliberately holding back information’ Annabel agreed.
‘May I remind you also that he is a prince’ Flunkit added.
‘A prince’ Blunkit added. ‘He is a prince.’
‘Look forget who he is’ Farrell spoke loudly, his patience wearing thin. ‘I believe we can do it. Weren’t you two assassins?’ he said to Blunkit and Flunkit.
‘How do you know that?’ Flunkit asked him.
‘I told him’ Blunkit said. ‘In the cave…after you left.’
‘Oh.’
‘Isn’t this the sort of thing you used to do all the time?’ Farrell asked the both of them.
‘We never did anything like this against royalty. He is a prince you know.’
‘Shut up’ Farrell snapped.
Barrel began to laugh.
‘If you start that shit again I’ll kill you myself’ Woodworm snarled at Barrel jabbing a finger at him.
‘Stop it both of you’ Carrot ordered.
‘Are you serious about this?’ Flute Stick asked Farrell.
‘I am.’
‘You do realise it would take us a while just to scout the place, once we find out exactly where it is that is. We can’t just go barging in you know.’ Blunkit said to Farrell.
‘You mean you don’t already know where he lives?’
‘We worked for the king’ Flunkit sighed, weary at having to explain this. ‘Not the princes. And anyway, he’s the thirteenth in line. He’s the least important, why would we know anything about him?’ he scratched his chin in thought. ‘North of Blackrain he said…should be easy to find though…’
‘I thought assassins knew about a lot of things’ Farrell said.
‘Sorry’ Flunkit shrugged. ‘We are not magicians.’
‘It’ll be very dangerous’ Shawn told him.
‘I think it might work’ Arlen said, speaking for the first time in ages.
‘Really?’ Farrell said, surprised at this.

‘Someone would have to stay here to look after Annabel’ Arlen said to Shawn, completely ignoring Farrell. ‘I think it should be you.’
‘Alright’ Shawn replied.
‘I will stay also’ Arlen added. ‘There needs to be more than one to stay behind I think.’
‘Um…. alright’ Shawn said again.
‘Well’ Arlen sighed loudly speaking to no one in particular. ‘Since this does not concern us, I think the three of us should leave.’
He, Shawn and Annabel left the table.
The others watched them depart in silence. Blunkit was the first to speak up.
‘If you are serious about this’ he said, ‘my brother and I would first have to do some work. In the meantime, think carefully on how you want to proceed.’

Weeks passed, and while the brothers Blunkit and Flunkit were gone, Farrell had time to work the details of his plan. It wasn’t perfect, but by the time they did arrive back at the inn, Farrell felt reasonably confident enough to proceed.
They left quickly to begin their journey on foot, leaving Arlen and Shawn behind to protect Annabel.

The morning after Farrell and the other mercenaries had left to begin their mission, Shawn had risen early to dress and have breakfast before Annabel woke. He did this to give her privacy, so that when she did wake, she could dress and do her lady things without an interruption or male presence.
Shawn paused on his way to the door, glancing at her one last time before he exited the room. She lay on her side, blankets wrapped tightly around her, even in the warm morning. She looked like a caterpillar wrapped in a cocoon, and the way she slept with her mouth open, dribbling on her pillows, looked ever so amusing.
Shawn smirked at this, turning away and closing the door quietly behind him, heading downstairs.
Here he found Arlen sitting at one of the tables, eating his breakfast.
‘Morning Shawn’ Arlen said.
Shawn pulled up a chair opposite Arlen.
‘That looks good’ he said, eyeing the plate before Arlen.
‘It is delicious. I’ll order another from the kitchen.’
A short time later, Shawn tucked into his breakfast. Opposite him, Arlen who had finished his watched Shawn eating in silence.
‘How is Annabel?’
‘She sleeps heavily’ Shawn replied. ‘And snores really loudly.’
‘Ha!’ Arlen barked throwing his head back.
‘So how long do you think we’ll have to stay here?’ Shawn asked him. ‘How long do you think until Farrell and the others come back?’
‘I don’t know’ Arlen said. ‘Could be a while. In any case…’ he said leaning back and stretching. ‘I think you should get used to hanging around here. I don’t think we’re going anywhere anytime soon.’

‘You're probably right. But…’
‘What?’
‘How should Annabel be kept entertained?’
Arlen tilted his head curiously at this, a smile playing about his lips.
‘Talk to her. Get to know her. You’ll find out what she likes.’ He grinned at Shawn. ‘I’ll see you around.’
Arlen rose from his chair. He left the inn, and didn’t look back.
Shawn remained at the table, deep in thought. It was several hours later, near midday, that Annabel finally emerged from her room. Shawn had waited for her all this time, keeping himself occupied by reading one of the few books the inn provided. He had nearly finished it by the time Annabel arrived downstairs.
‘Shawn’ she said. ‘There you are. Could you find me some food? I'm starving.’
‘Lucky for you they happen to be serving food at this time’ he told her, closing his book and pushing it away from him across the table. ‘But I don’t think they will like it if you start asking them for food at random times of the day.’
‘I know’ she said, taking the empty seat Arlen had sat and staring at him across the table. ‘I was just so tired.’
‘I can imagine’ he said to her. ‘A lot has happened for you in the last twenty-four hours.’
Her expression saddened a little, and Shawn wished he hadn’t said that.
‘I’ll go find you something’ he said hastily to her. ‘What do you want?’
Shawn ordered food with her, and a short time later they ate together.
‘So’ Shawn began, lifting his fork to eat, ‘what sorts of things do you enjoy doing?’
Annabel glanced up at him. ‘Are you trying to flirt with me?’
‘What?’ Shawn started, beginning to blush. ‘No! I…’
‘Relax’ Annabel giggled, amused by his reaction. ‘I'm just teasing.’
‘I'm glad to see you’ve become relaxed enough to make jokes’ Shawn sighed in relief. ‘When we first found you…you were so scared.’
‘Well’ Annabel sat back. ‘It’s much easier to relax without those burly mercenaries around me. They’re so intimidating. The company I share now is so much better.’ She glanced across the table at him. ‘You’ve done a wonderful job protecting me’ she said. ‘Thank you.’
He smiled back at her, feeling his heart skip a beat.

Outside, Arlen sat in the streets on a bench, soaking up the sun, deep in thought.
Something caught his attention however, breaking him from his trance. Shawn and Annabel were leaving the inn together.
Arlen watched them go, then smiled to himself.

‘So’ Shawn said to Annabel as they walked. ‘Is there anything in particular you would like to do?’
‘I know’ Annabel beamed. ‘Let’s rent some horses and ride across the land.’
‘We should stay here’ Shawn frowned. ‘It’s safer in this town.’
Annabel scowled.

‘I'm sure there’s plenty to do here’ Shawn told her.
‘Hey, why don’t we go look at the shops.’
‘Oh no’ Shawn groaned. ‘That’s just like something my sister would say.’
‘You’ve got a sister?’ Annabel said perking up. She sat upon a bench they were passing, tucking the dress beneath her. ‘Tell me about her.’
‘Well’ Shawn began, taking a seat next to her. ‘Her name is Gracie. She’s twenty years old. She loves animals. She is stubborn as a mule, and has a fowl temper. But she is very loyal to her family.’ Shawn frowned in thought. ‘She’s always willing to help, as long as it benefits her that is…she dreams of owning her own farm one day, so she can breed and train horses.’
Annabel leaned forward on her knees, smiling at him. ‘She sounds like quite a character.’
‘She is’ Shawn replied, the edges of his lips curling in a smile and his eyes becoming distant as he thought of her. ‘It’s been a while since I last saw her. I've been so caught up in everything that’s been going on, that for a short time I completely forgot about her.’
‘You two are close?’
‘Yes’ Shawn nodded. ‘I miss her very much.’
‘Don’t worry.’ Annabel sang happily. ‘She’s safe where she is, I am sure. You will see her again, I just know it.’
He smiled encouragingly at her.
‘So’ Annabel said stretching like a cat. ‘Tell me about yourself.’
‘Me?’
‘Yes.’
Shawn began to shift uncomfortably. ‘There’s not much to tell really.’
‘Oh, that’s such a man answer’ Annabel scolded. ‘That’s just the sort of thing my brother would have said.’
‘You have a brother?’
‘Don’t change the subject.’ Annabel shoved him playfully. ‘Tell me about yourself’ she repeated.
‘What do you want to know?’
‘What's your favourite colour?’
Shawn raised an eyebrow. ‘Seriously?’
‘Yes’ Annabel rolled her eyes.
‘I don’t have one.’
‘Uuhhgg.’
‘Sorry’ he shrugged.
‘Alright’ Annabel persevered. ‘What do you like to do? You know…. for fun?’
‘What in a normal day?’
‘Anytime’ Annabel groaned.
Shawn made a thinking face. It was several seconds before he answered.
‘I like riding, spending time with my family, spending time with friends.’
‘You have a good life then?’ Annabel asked him when it was clear he wasn’t going to elaborate.
‘I do.’ Shawn glanced sideways at her. ‘Don’t you?’
‘Yes’ Annabel replied. ‘I do, my family are very good to me…but…’
‘What is it?’

‘All my life, I have dreamed of leaving my home, of travelling and seeing the world……I never thought it would happen like this.’
‘Well…’ Shawn’s eyes glinted. ‘Life takes us all on strange and winding roads. Nothing ever turns out how we plan.’
‘So how did you come to be here? Why are you on this quest?’
‘Amaia is my cousin.’
‘Oh’ Annabel said in surprise. ‘I didn’t know.’
‘I may as well tell you this as well. Arlen is my uncle.’
‘Oh.’ Annabel said again. ‘So, the three of you are all related. You, Arlen and Farrell.’
‘Yes.’
‘So…the others?’
‘They're just mercenaries we hired to help us.’
‘How much are you paying them?’
Shawn glanced at her. ‘Come on’ he said rising. ‘Let’s go look at the shops.’
They walked side by side leisurely through the town, at one point passing a small group of children as they made their way through the streets. The children of varying ages were sitting quietly upon a wall by one of the buildings with a goat by their side; they were all dressed in brightly coloured clothes, including the goat. These were gypsies.
‘You never really told me about yourself’ Shawn said to her as they walked past the children.
‘There’s not much to tell really’ she replied.
‘Now don’t give me that again!’ Shawn frowned at her. ‘I want to know more about you. What sort of things do you like?’
‘I like’ Annabel began, tapping her chin in thought as she pondered, ‘…dancing.’
‘Dancing?’
‘And playing some instruments.’
‘What sort of instruments?’
‘Now don’t get greedy’ Annabel laughed. ‘I'm not going to tell you *everything* about me. I will tell you some, but you’ll have to find out most of it for yourself.’
Shawn smirked slyly at this, flashing his perfect white teeth at her and running his fingers through his blond hair.
‘You're teasing me.’
‘Come on’ Annabel said to him tugging his sleeve. ‘Let’s look at some shiny things.’
‘Shiny things?’
‘Jewellery.’
‘Oh.’
‘Come on.’
They wandered about the town for hours looking at this and that. At least Annabel did most of the looking; Shawn for the most part simply allowed himself to be dragged around and feigned interest in the things she showed him.
Hours later when night was creeping upon them, and the sky began to darken, mysterious figures began to appear in the streets.
Beautiful women of dark skin, dark hair and dark eyes, wearing brightly coloured dresses with bare bellies, emerged from hidden places. Some slipped out of dark streets, some out of

brightly painted carriages pulled by white and black horses with excessively long manes and tails.
One of the women, so much like the others drew close to Shawn as she skulked by. She looked deeply into him with her dark eyes large and beautiful, sauntering past and stroking his chest as she did so.
More of them came, and they began to gather in number. Men and women and children all dressed in bright clothes. They gathered on street corners and in the squares and wider roads, many of them danced, many played instruments such and drums, violins and flutes. Others called out to passers-by, encouraging them to buy the foreign products they were selling.
They were loud folk, calling out to others to watch them dance and play. But the people of the town did not complain, for the gypsies brought them pleasure, especially the women, with their beautiful slender bodies and exotic dark skin. Many men were drawn closer.
Annabel paused to consider one of the male gypsies playing the violin. A handsome young man with a short beard and wearing black eyeliner, he dressed in the same bright colours as the women who danced around him.
'You think you can play that thing?' Annabel said to the gypsy boldly.
'Perhaps the lady would like to try and best me' the charming man smiled.
Annabel strolled confidently up towards him, snatching the violin and bow from his grasp and turning her back on him. She lifted the instrument, resting it on her shoulder. She began to play. Her fingers quick, and the movement of the bow precise. She played a quick and beautiful tune. Though far from being offended the young male gypsy began to clap and holler loudly in pleasure.
'The girl can play!' he cried. 'Let her not play alone. Drums' he called to the gypsy children who sat nearby. 'Hurry!'
One of the older children picked up a large drum and began to beat it as Annabel continued to play. As she reached the next verse, she was joined by more instruments. Two of the other gypsy men joined in with her, playing an entirely different tune to accompany her own. It was a well-known piece that Annabel played, and the others were able to join in with her melody with ease.
Shawn began to clap and laugh as the gypsy women began to dance around them with arms held high.
The group played a beautiful piece, many layered and full of life, growing quicker and more complex as it neared its end. When it was finished, many clapped for her, both the people of the town, and the other gypsies, and of course, Shawn as well. The young man Annabel had stolen the instrument from gave Annabel a seductive look as she handed the violin back to him.
'Such skill the lady has' he spoke smoothly in a foreign accent.
'I hope I didn't best you' Annabel gleamed.
'Not a chance' he smirked back.
He took the instrument back from her, placing it against his shoulder, looking as natural as if the instrument was a part of his body. He struck up another tune, leading the way for the others to follow suit.
Annabel danced with another of the handsome young gypsy men. Covered extensively with tattoos on his bare arms and shoulders, his body was well defined, lean and muscular. He

wore excessive gold jewellery and long thin strips of purple and blue coloured cloth tied to his wrists which he danced with, twirling them through the air.
Shawn danced with one of the women. Tall she was, wearing a dress of many layers that flowed smoothly, she held the sides of the skirt up for him like wings as she danced, twirling often. She had flowers in her hair that fell freely about her shoulders, and danced with vigour, throwing her skirt about and tossing her head. The gold coins hanging from a chain around her waist and chest jangled when she danced. A beautiful creature she was.
As the song ended and the next began, the young man Annabel danced with bowed to her, never taking his eyes from her. He handed her a flower as he did so, flicking it out seeming from mid-air and lacing it between her fingers.
'For the pretty lady.'
The next dance began after the sun had set. Shawn and Annabel danced together for a short time beneath the lanterns that hung above them, lighting the streets below. Shawn a short time after was taken away from Annabel by another young gypsy woman to share a dance with. A short time after that, he was lost in the crowd. When he did return, he had brought Annabel a gift. It was a beautiful silk purple shawl, pattered with silver moons and stars. It smelt of perfume and incense. Annabel accented it graciously.

Long into the night this went on, until Shawn and Annabel finally retreated to their beds back at the inn. Annabel, so exhausted fell on her bed and was asleep almost instantly without even changing into her nightdress.
Shawn beamed down at her, feeling a strange warmth inside. He changed quickly before going to bed, but not before looking for Arlen. He wasn't in his room, or elsewhere within the inn.
Shawn decided to put it from his mind. He lay his head down upon his pillows, sighing in contentment. He closed his eyes, and was asleep in minutes.

'Ok' Flunkit began as they gathered in a hidden place outside Tristan's home. 'Let's make this quick. Blunkit and I know where the guards stand in this building, they are here, here, here, here…' he pointed out the locations on a crude sketch he had drawn of the house on a piece of paper. 'Woodworm, Flute Stick and Carrot will stand watch here, here and here' he pointed. 'If anything happens give the signal, that bird-call I showed you earlier. You know how to do it by now. Not much else to say' he continued in a bored tone. 'Farrell, you'll come with me and Blunkit…lets go.'
'Wait, hold on a minute' Farrell said grabbing him to stop him. 'Shouldn't we go into more detail?'
'We don't normally do that' Flunkit dismissed. 'We normally just throw ourselves in. We know what we're doing.'
Blunkit nodded in agreement beside him.
'Right' Flunkit said, 'let's go.'
'Wait' Farrell said again, grabbing onto Flunkit's shoulder.
'What?' Flunkit huffed wearily.

Farrell's words caught in his mouth, and he couldn't think of anything to say. So he shut his mouth and let go of him.
'Right' Flunkit said again. 'Let's go.'
Carrot helped the three of them climb through an open window, and Blunkit, Flunkit and Farrell entered the grand home, Farrell doing so awkwardly with his arm still in a splint, thinking briefly to himself.
Gods I'm getting too old for this…
Blunkit left their side for a moment to 'clear an area' or so he put it, leaving Farrell and Flunkit to walk the corridors without him. He met up with them a short time later.
'Right' he whispered. 'That's done, now we head for our target.'
'Who's our target?' Farrell asked, just realising that he should have asked this obvious question earlier.
'His wife' Flunkit whispered back. 'She's normally in the office at this time writing letters and notes.' He beaconed for Farrell to follow. 'It's this way.'
When they reached the study, the door was left open for them and they peered into the room, seeing a slender woman with beautiful golden hair tied neatly behind her head. She leant forward on a desk with her back to them, and was indeed writing as Flunkit had said she would be.
Blunkit signalled the other two to stay in the doorway as he moved into the room, silent as a breath on the wind.
He approached the woman, who was completely oblivious to his presence, and moved closer until he stood right behind her.
Blunkit grabbed her from behind, clapping a hand over her mouth so she could not make a sound. He pulled her back and out of her chair, the chair toppled on its side as Blunkit dragged her.
'Good job' Flunkit hissed from nearby. 'Now quickly, knock her out so we can take her with us.'
She had grabbed the only two things in reach when Blunkit had surprised her, the quill and the paper she had been writing on. As Blunkit slipped his hand around her neck and began to tighten, she scrawled a note onto the paper as quick as she could and held it up for them to read.
'What?' Blunkit said uncertainly, loosening his grip slightly as he read it.
The woman shook the note again, encouraging them to read it. Flunkit and Farrell stepped closer, entering the room and closing the door quietly after them.
'I can help you' Farrell spoke aloud, reading the note.
The woman lowered the page, writing hastily before showing them the paper again.
'Trust me?' Farrell read. 'The fuck we do. You're Tristan's wife, why in the hell would we….?' He fell silent as the woman began to write again, the quill scratching noisily on the paper.
'He hates me' Flunkit read.
'Oh I'm getting sick of this' Blunkit sighed. 'I'm going to let you go' he said. 'Scream. Make a noise, or be awkward in any way and I'll make sure you regret it. Is that clear?'
She nodded vigorously, unable to speak through the tight grip Blunkit still held her in, his hand still firmly over her mouth to keep her silent.

Blunkit released her, and she fell forwards, hunched over and coughing hysterically.
'Is that any way to treat a woman?' she said rubbing her neck and turning to face them. 'I hope you don't greet all women this way.' She tossed the quill and paper onto the desk behind her and placed her hands on her hips, seemingly completely unfazed by seeing strangers in her home and being grabbed and nearly choked. 'Who are you?'
'Shut it' Flunkit spat. 'We're asking the questions here.'
'Fine' she sighed wearily. 'Would you like a drink at least?'
The three men all blinked stupidly at her.
'What?' Farrell stammered.
She smirked in amusement at them. 'Perhaps you want me to act as you expected.' She fell to her knees then, clasping her hands together before her and sobbing. 'Please don't hurt me. Please. I'll do anything, I'll tell you anything you want, just don't hurt me.'
They just stared at her in confusion. Farrell glanced towards Blunkit and Flunkit either side of him, wondering what they were making of this. But they seemed just as confused as he was.
'I don't play that bullshit' the woman said, dropping the act and rising to her feet. She leant back against the desk. 'You came here for information I presume' she said crossing her arms. 'Perhaps something regarding my husband? I'll tell you what I know and will do so willingly.'
'But…why?' Blunkit asked uncertainly.
The woman shrugged. 'We were never really that close. I wasn't lying when I told you he hates me. The only time we're ever getting along is…. well…' she smirked at them. 'I have a duty as a wife. My name is Olithia by the way' she added as an afterthought. 'Just in case you wanted to know.'
'We want to know about Amaia' Farrell interrupted, getting right to the point.
Olithia blinked in surprise at this. 'Amaia? How do you know of her?'
'I'm her father' Farrell said.
A great smile spread across her face at this. 'Is that you?' she beamed, suddenly greatly amused. 'I never thought I'd see the day where I met her *actual* father.'
'What do you mean?' Farrell asked hesitantly.
'I don't know what bollocks he's been feeding you' she went on smiling widely, 'but I'm sure it runs something along the lines of…himself being the real father and yourself being the pretend father? Is that right? And now he's looking for her again. He wants your help, doesn't he?' she asked them. 'He wants you to help him find her again after he lost her.'
They all exchanged glances.
'What do you know?' Blunkit asked.
'That he is not to be trusted' Olithia answered shortly. 'He's lying to you. *My* daughter nineteen years ago was stillborn. So grief-stricken was he, that in his mind he adopted another of the same age my daughter would have been. Amaia, your daughter' she said to Farrell. 'He watched her for years as she grew, and over that time he developed strong feelings for her and he began to believe his own lies, after a time thinking them to be true. And when the king's soldiers came to take Amaia away, he was there to protect her. He took her away to where he believed was safety.'
'But…' Farrell began. 'Why did the king want her?'

‘Don’t you know what she is?’ Olithia asked him, eyes gleaming brightly. ‘Surely you must know.’
‘I want to hear you say it’ Farrell said.
‘Weather Maker’ Olithia replied. ‘That’s what she is, like her mother Ramana, and *her* mother before her. It runs in the family you know, and I have no such powers…’
The door burst open suddenly, and many figures stormed into the room.
Things didn’t end well for them, and they were discovered and surrounded before they had the chance to ask Olithia all they wanted to ask her. This happened for several reasons. Firstly, they had stayed too long in the palace, which was dangerous enough on its own. Secondly, Barrel’s laughter as he waited outside had attracted attention, and thirdly, one of the unconscious bodies Blunkit had left behind had been discovered.
‘Oh cack’ Blunkit exclaimed as Tristan, surrounded by armed soldiers strode towards them, shoulders hunched and body shaking, barely able to suppress his rage.
‘We found one of the men you knocked out’ Tristan snarled through gritted teeth. ‘Maybe next time you should hide them better.’
‘I told you I was getting too old for this’ Blunkit said casually to Farrell.
‘Lock them all up!’ Tristan ordered his men. ‘Put them in the cellar with the others until I decide what to do with them.’
Blunkit, Flunkit and Farrell were all led away by the guards and locked in the cellar with Woodworm, Flute Stick, Carrot and Barrel, who hadn’t stopped laughing yet.
When they had been taken away, Tristan rounded on his wife.
‘I think you should let them go’ Olithia commented off-handed. ‘They are rather charming, don’t you think?’
‘Be quiet woman!’ Tristan barked. ‘I've had enough of your poison.’ He turned to one of his guards that remained. ‘Keep them there’ he ordered, ‘and let them rot.’

Chapter Thirty-Two
Tender Hearts

‘Where do you keep going all the time?’ Annabel asked Arlen one day when he returned to the inn after being gone all day.
‘Oh’ Arlen replied meekly. ‘I……nowhere in particular.’ He took a deep breath. ‘I find it hard to stay in one place, I'm…. shifting constantly. I can’t keep still. I just can’t settle.’
‘Why didn’t you go with the others?’ Annabel asked him as he sat across the table from her, Shawn by her side.
‘Because of Farrell’ Arlen said to the table.
‘Do you truly hate him so much?’ Annabel asked him sadly.
‘Yes, I do.’
‘Then why did you agree to come with us on that day I got my new dress?’ Annabel asked him.
‘Because….’ Arlen replied, unsure himself how he would answer, ‘because…’ he simply said. After a time of a prolonged silence he spoke again. ‘I felt protective of you. You remind

me of Amaia in some ways…and I thought….' he trailed off. 'But I know now there is no need for me to insist on being around you, because you have Shawn now.'
Annabel and Shawn exchanged a glance then, and Shawn smiled at her. Annabel beamed joyfully back at him, blushing slightly, and despite himself Arlen smiled too. He had for the longest time worried for Annabel, brooding over her in secret in his mind, but around Shawn, she seemed at peace, seemed happy even, despite everything.
Arlen felt less guilty now for being partially responsible for taking her away from her family, and his mind he felt a little more at ease because of this.
'I wonder how the others are doing' Annabel spoke up suddenly.

Flute Stick shifted in his sleep, turning his head back and forth and shifting uncomfortably on the solid floor he lay on. He woke abruptly then, screaming in terror and thrashing around. Carrot was by his side in an instant, trying to calm him and speaking quickly to him words of reassurance until several seconds later Flute Stick calmed, sweating and breathing deeply, but silent at last.
Barrel began to laugh hysterically.
'Will you shut him up!' Blunkit hollered, speaking to no one in particular.
'Shut up!' Woodworm yelled at Barrel, grabbing him by the front of his shirt and shaking him. 'Shut up shut up shut up!'
'What's wrong with him' Farrell asked Carrot, ignoring Woodworm and Barrel.
'He suffers flashbacks' Carrot replied.
'Of what?'
'Mind your own business.'
Woodworm and Barrel began to scuffle in the corner, Barrel trying to fight back to defend himself. They had only been locked up for a short time together, and already patience was stretched to near breaking. The prince had ordered them to be locked up in a cellar behind thick iron bars, imprisoned alongside the finest wines they had ever seen in their lives.
'This isn't so bad' Flunkit sighed, taking a deep swig from one of the bottles. 'This is good stuff, you should try some.'
'What's wrong with you?' Farrell growled furiously. 'Don't you know that we might be killed for this?'
'Well' Flunkit sighed again, 'better make the most of this wine then.'
'Not so bad' Farrell repeated with a groan. 'This is unbearable. If I don't get out of here soon one way or the other, I may as well just kill myself and save the prince the trouble.'
'Well' Flunkit said. 'Whatever you think is best. Try some of this wine before you go.'
Farrell sat in one of the corners in silence, sulking to himself and thinking of their dire predicament and how miserable he was.
'How did I get stuck here like this?' he mumbled incoherently to himself.
A short time later a figure descended the stairs beyond the bars that trapped them. She was a small female figure dressed in plain clothes and carrying a tray of meagre food.
'Oh' Blunkit said in a groan. 'You're that woman's handmaiden.'
'What woman?' Carrot asked him.
'The one we spoke to earlier' Blunkit replied. 'Olithia.'

‘My name is Sonya’ the small figure spoke in a quiet voice. She sounded as if she was not used to talking, only being spoken to.
Flunkit rose from where he sat, moving closer to the bars that caged them.
‘I um…’ Sonya mumbled quietly, ‘this food is for all of you.’
‘That is very kind of you’ Flunkit said to her.
‘My masters wish for me to bring this to you.’
‘So, they want to keep us alive’ Farrell said, not in the least bit relieved. ‘At least for the meantime’ he added.
‘The prince said he would offer you drinks but you’ve probably already helped yourself to his wine’ Sonya spoke. At this Barrel began to cackle.
Sonya placed the tray on the floor, just far away enough for her to be at a safe distance from their reach. She turned to leave.
‘Wait!’ Flunkit called after her.
The others gave him a strange look as Sonya hesitated, glancing fearfully up the stairs she had come from as if expecting an order to be thrown down at her, or to be scolded for being late. She looked back at Flunkit nervously.
‘I've brought you food’ she said. ‘What more do you want?’
‘What is such a young creature like you doing working as a slave?’ Flunkit asked her.
‘Hey that’s a good one’ Woodworm said. ‘Gain her trust, convince her to help us then rip her throat out. I like it.’
‘God will you just keep your mouth shut’ Carrot sighed. ‘You're as bad as Barrel.’
‘I don’t think so.’
‘Listen.’ Flunkit said to Sonya. ‘Ignore the rest of them. They're not worth listening to.’
‘Thanks’ said his brother Blunkit.
‘How did you come to be here?’ Flunkit asked her.
‘I…’ Sonya began uncertainly.
‘Speak girl’ Flunkit said kindly. ‘Don’t be afraid. You can speak to me. How did you come to be here, in this retched place?’
‘It was not by choice’ the quiet girl spoke to her feet. ‘My family were struggling with dept……and…’
‘They gave you up?’ Woodworm said loudly. ‘Ha! That’s unfortunate. HAHAHA!’
Sonya took a step back.
‘No’ Flunkit said. ‘Please wait!’
But the poor girl could take no more. She turned and fled back up the stairs she had come, with tears in her eyes.
‘You idiot!’ Flunkit snarled rounding on Woodworm. ‘What did you have to do that for?’
‘What?’ Woodworm shrugged carelessly. ‘I didn’t do anything.’
‘She could have put the food a bit closer’ Carrot complained, reaching through the bars to grab the metal tray. ‘Got it’ he said triumphantly after a few seconds of trying. He pulled it closer.
The tray could not be pulled into the cellar without tipping the food, and so the others gathered around to eat the small portions given to them by reaching through the bars.
‘Wait a minute’ Woodworm spoke slowly as his thoughts processed. ‘Are you…saying we can gain this girls trust? And…. maybe……and you're *serious* about it?’

‘I'm saying’ Flunkit said through gritted teeth, ‘that the next time she comes, you would do well to keep your mouth shut.’
‘Wait, you are serious about this, aren’t you?’ Farrell spoke up. ‘You really think it’s possible to convince her to let us go?’
‘It’s the best hope we’ve got’ Flute Stick grumbled at the thought, chin resting on his knees.
‘She’s quiet, submissive’ Carrot said. ‘It *might* be possible to sway her.’
‘I think it’s worth a shot’ Blunkit shrugged hopefully. ‘Good idea’ he nudged his brother. ‘It’s not great, but it’s the best we’ve got.’

It was several hours later that Sonya returned. She faltered with the tray in her hands, gazing back at the faces of the men behind the bars. They all stared at her now, smiling unconvincingly, all except for Flunkit, who appeared nervous.
‘I'm sorry if the others scared you before’ he said to her. ‘Please forgive them for their crude soldier ways.’
Sonya said nothing, but stood there uncertainly with the tray in her hands.
‘What time is it?’ Flunkit began.
‘The sun is setting’ Sonya told him weakly.
‘Is that it?!’ Woodworm complained loudly. ‘Just one day we’ve been here? It’s felt like *years* stuck with you lot.’
Flunkit shot him a dark glare. The others were all glaring at him too.
Woodworm quickly fell silent, folding his arms and turning away.
‘What have you got there?’ Flunkit asked her, reaching to get a better look at the tray she carried.
‘It’s just…food.’
‘You don’t look happy here’ he said to her. ‘Why is that?’
‘My life is very hard’ she said to him sadly. ‘I work hard every day, and my mistress is cruel.’
‘That’s a terrible thing to hear.’
Sonya lowered her gaze.
‘Tell me about yourself’ Flunkit said.
Woodworm smirked to himself, whispering to Blunkit next to him. ‘This is going to be easy.’
‘There is nothing about me that’s worth telling’ Sonya said.
‘Nonsense’ Flunkit told her. ‘Everyone has something interesting to tell.’
She didn’t answer him, merely stood there still holding the tray.
‘There is a big wide world out there’ Flunkit told her. ‘You could do so much more.’
Sonya’s eyes lit up.
‘What do you mean?’
‘Surely you don’t want to serve cruel masters for the rest of your life. What do *you* want to do? For yourself?’
‘I…I never really…’
‘Let me guess, you’ve never considered the possibility?’
Sonya glanced at him briefly, before her eyes flickered down to the ground again.
‘Just think’ Flunkit spoke, ‘of all the wonderful things you could do for yourself, if you were *free*.’

He spoke these words, aiming at the one thing that was most important to any slave in life, the one thing that to her felt so far out of reach.
‘Free’ Sonya repeated weakly.
‘You would like that wouldn’t you?’ Flunkit told her, pressing his advantage. ‘To be free.’
‘I've never wanted anything more.’
‘It can happen’ Flunkit went on. ‘You could be free…if you wanted…. if you tried…’
‘How?’ Sonya pleaded. ‘I've been a slave for so long. I know little else. I can’t do anything.’
‘You can’ Flunkit said, ‘if you tried.
‘But…’
‘It all begins’ Flunkit said, reaching towards her, ‘with one small step of courage.’
She drew back fearfully, staring wide eyed at Flunkit’s hand.
‘Take it’ he told her.
Sonya put down the tray, and took the item he offered from him.
‘Give this back to me’ Flunkit told her, ‘when you decide you want to be free.’
‘How will I be free?’ she asked him.
‘I will help you.’
‘But…’
‘If you help me escape’ Flunkit said, ‘and help the rest of us escape’ he glanced behind him at the others,’ we will help you in return. We will all be free, and you will be able start a new life for yourself, just like you always wanted.’
‘It’s so risky’ Sonya said hopelessly.
‘Freedom is worth the risk’ Flunkit told her. ‘Just think about it.’
At that moment a shrieking call came from atop the stairs, it was Olithia, commanding Sonya to return.
‘What's taking so long you wretched girl?’ came Olithia’s voice. ‘Must I follow you to make sure you're doing your work properly?’
Sonya tucked the item Flunkit had given her away, turning and rushing as quickly as she could back up the stairs.
‘What did you give to her?’ Farrell asked Flunkit when she had gone.
‘A knife.’
‘Where did you hide that?’
‘I'm not saying.’
‘You know’ Woodworm said with hope in his voice, ‘I think this might actually work.’
‘The girl is…. unbelievably impressionable’ Flute Stick mused, leaning back and folding his arms behind his head as he lay down. ‘I predict we will be out of here by tomorrow. God I miss daylight. This is just like being in that awful cave.’
‘It feels wrong to exploit her’ Farrell was saying regretfully to himself. ‘She seems….so desperate.’
‘The strong pray on the weak’ Blunkit shrugged. ‘That’s just the way it’s always been.’
Farrell turned away from all of them, looking up towards the stairs where Sonya had fled. He wondered what would happen to all of them in the end.

‘That girl took an awfully long time taking the prisoners their food’ Olithia told her husband casually, the instant she had sent Sonya away to perform another petty task. ‘I think they’re planning to escape and using her to do so. I’d keep an eye on them all if I were you.’
Tristan made a noise of agreement at his wife’s advice, but really, he wasn’t listening. Just like most things she said to him, he barely noticed she was even there, let alone what she said.
‘Yes’ he mumbled not looking at her. ‘I’ll see to it.’
Olithia smirked in amusement, before walking away.
Sometime later, Tristan stopped what he was doing, and sat back in his chair to think.
‘I should see them’ he said to himself, ‘I have to decide what to do with them.’

‘We don’t know where she is’ Farrell said to him. ‘That’s why we came here in secret.’
‘Yeah’ Woodworm added. ‘We don’t trust you. You're a liar.’
‘You say I’m the dishonest one here?’ Tristan asked in mock amusement. ‘I doubt that, a comment like that is a bit rich coming from the likes of you. Who are you anyway?’
‘I'm not about to tell you anything about myself’ Woodworm quickly retaliated.
‘In any case’ Tristan shrugged. ‘I have ways to make you confess to anything……if I wanted.’
‘Make your threats scum’ Woodworm growled through the bars. ‘You don’t frighten me.’
‘Stop it’ Carrot snarled at him. ‘It will only be to our disadvantage to anger him.’
‘So, you thought you’d interrogate my wife’ Tristan said to the others, ignoring Woodworm. ‘And you planned to kidnap her I imagine, perhaps use her as a bargaining tool, perhaps a ransom even. You would have been wasting your time. I would have been glad to see her gone, and you would wish you had never taken her in the first place. I'm disappointed you didn’t succeed.’
‘It’s like that is it?’ Woodworm groaned. ‘You're not the only one who’s disappointed.’
‘So’ Tristan spoke to Farrell, ignoring the others now. ‘There is *nothing* you can tell me that may help me find Amaia?’
‘We seem to know as much as you at this point’ Farrell admitted. He waited for a moment, considering the prince. ‘Are you going to kill us?’
‘That remains to be seen’ Tristan spoke slowly.
‘But think of how Amaia would feel’ Barrel said, speaking for the first time in ages, ‘if you kill *him’* he jabbed a finger towards Farrell. ‘I doubt she would be very pleased about that.’
‘I don’t like you’ Tristan narrowed his eyes at him. ‘You laugh too much, and anyway’ he went on. ‘She needn’t know. It will be as if you *never* existed’ he said to Farrell.
‘You would lie to her?’ Farrell asked with a level voice, face expressionless.
‘I would do anything to protect her, after all, she is my daughter.’
‘You're wrong!’ Farrell called after him as he made to leave. ‘She has nothing to do with you! You're meddling in affairs that are none of your business. You are causing her more harm than good.’
‘I am the one who protected her for most of her life’ Tristan replied calmly back. ‘If only you had done the same.’

Sonya continued with her boring and repetitive task, the knife she was given by Flunkit was hidden from view beneath her dress. She couldn't take her mind off it, the constant press of its steel touch against her skin was keeping her from concentrating on her work, and her mind began to wander.
She paused what she was doing for a moment, seeing a figure strolling through the room she worked, moving casually, a handsome figure, tall and lean and muscular. He approached Olithia, who was preening herself in the mirror. She jumped in surprised as the figure appeared suddenly behind her, turning and beaming up at him.
'Alan' she said rising to her feet. 'You're back. Did your hunting trip go alright?'
Alan gave her a quick hug, and Olithia embraced him lovingly back, sighing happily into his chest as he towered over her. He was the only person in the world Olithia truly cared about and trusted. Olithia always felt safer with him around. Her son.
'I've brought you a gift' Alan said to her, producing a beautiful fox-fur scarf from beneath his coat.
'Oh' Olithia exclaimed, hands going to her cheeks as she gazed upon the thing. 'How thoughtful of you' she said as she examined the scarf. 'My dear boy.' She caressed him tenderly, reaching up on her tip-toes to kiss his cheek. 'Thank you…'
Sonya watched the interaction between mother and son, feeling dead in her heart, and wishing more than anything for a better life. There was nothing in the world she wouldn't give to be someone else.
'Don't stop working' came a sharp bark from behind her. 'You've got plenty to do; you don't have time to dawdle.'
The order came from another servant, an older more experienced lady. Near enough everyone around her had the right to give her orders as the hierarchy amongst the servants in the house was based on age, and Sonya was one of the youngest here, in body and in mind.
Sonya glowered as she listened to the order, obeying silently but feeling resentment and anger stirring in her heart. It was at this point she took Flunkit's words more seriously, and she thought again of what he had said, but this time, considered it as a true possibility.

'Oh this is an exciting turn of events' Barrel chirped happily the moment Tristan had gone. 'Which of them do you think is the *real* father?' he asked the others.
'I don't care' Blunkit droned.
'Oh I can't wait to see how this turns out' Barrel went on gleefully, rubbing his hands together.
'How it turns out?' Flute Stick repeated. 'We could all be killed. That's how it could *turn out*.'
Barrel began to laugh hysterically then, the others simply turned away from him, even Woodworm who normally rose in anger to this sat quietly ignoring him. He was just too tired.
They all kept to themselves mostly from then on, each brooding on their own thoughts and feelings. Farrell sat alone in a corner, feeling thoroughly depressed, and wondering what Arlen, Shawn and Annabel were doing at this time. He was glad at least they were all far away from here and safe.
Sometime later, Sonya returned again, carrying another meagre tray of food.

The others were ravenous, and began to fight amongst themselves even before she had placed the tray on the floor. Flunkit however ignored to food completely, and spoke instead to Sonya.
'Have you decided what you will do?' he asked over the bickering voices of the others.
'My mistress is watching me' Sonya said fearfully. 'I…I can't…'
'Give it time' Flunkit said not giving up. 'Things will get better.'
'Well they can't get much worse.' She lifted her eyes to his and held his gaze, looking at him properly for the first time. 'You're the first one in years to show me true kindness.' She lowered her eyes to the ground again. 'Thank you.' Sonya glanced quickly behind her and back up the stairs. 'I have to go; my mistress will get suspicious if…' she left hastily before Flunkit could say anymore.
He gave a disappointed sigh, his body deflating as he watched her go.
'Hey' Blunkit said to him.
'What?' he answered his brother.
'I saved you something' Blunkit said lifting a chunk of stale bread.
Flunkit sighed wearily, feeling only resentment towards the bread.
'I would be far happier with a hot roast, with a stack of potatoes and loads of gravy.'
He took it gratefully from his brother nonetheless, thanking him for the trouble.
'Do you think we will get through to her?' Blunkit asked him.
Flunkit shrugged. 'Only time will tell.'
'I only hope it will not be too much time' Blunkit added as he considered the others around them.
Farrell was sitting quietly in the corner as usual, with his back to the room, Barrel and Woodworm were fighting again, having gained some energy to do so at the presence of food, however poor. And Carrot and Flute Stick were half-heartedly trying to break the two apart. After a while they gave up, and went to their own corner. Carrot slept, while Flute Stick sat beside him and stayed awake.
'What a sorry lot we are' Blunkit grumbled. 'I'm surprised we managed to get this far at all.'
'Luck must have been on our side' Flunkit replied. 'At least for a short time...'

Days passed and still they remained where they were. They at least had not been killed yet, but to say that they were alive would be an untrue statement. Days of living on poor food had left them all weak and lethargic. For most of the time now they sat there in listless silence, willing sleep to come, only so that it may pass the time. But it was hard to sleep on a solid floor, and they only succumbed to that blissful state, when their mind could no longer keep them awake, and the discomfort, at least for a short time did not seem to matter.
For the most part recently they had simply ignored each other. Barrel, laughed half-heartedly now, even his laughter sounded weaker, and Carrot when he slept woke up screaming more than once, like Flute Stick had done. Flute Stick was there to comfort him, touching his shoulder lightly, letting Carrot know he was there. Carrot would slowly come to his senses and relax, remembering where he was and calming.

Sonya was letting her guard down. She still feared her mistress, but day by day she would dare to spend slightly longer down in the cellar, speaking to Flunkit. The others ignored them, reaching reluctantly for the scraps that had been left for them. The food tasted awful, whatever it was. Sonya didn't speak again of freedom, and still remained frightened of everything around her. But Flunkit still remained hopeful, long after the others had lost hope.

One day, an unknown number of days after the wine had started to run out, Barrel spoke.
'I want to die.'
Woodworm slowly turned towards him with hollow eyes; his face like the others had become gaunt.
'I could help you' he said.
'It seems perhaps that Tristan intends us to starve to death' Carrot spoke, 'or be driven mad with boredom.'
'Hey that actually sounds like a good idea' Blunkit said to Woodworm at Barrel's words.
'Don't say that' Flunkit frowned at his brother.
'Oh come now. I'm not scare of death, and neither are you.'
Flunkit only scowled at his brother.
'Death does sound quite appealing at this point,' Flute Stick said in a mumble that was barely audible.
'Who's first then?' Woodworm spoke up.
Farrell regarded him silently. He thought nothing.
'I'm first' Barrel said rising.
Barrel walked over to where Woodworm sat on one of the empty barrels, Woodworm leant down to the floor, picking up an empty wine bottle. It took him several attempts to break the base, but when it was done, he held Barrel by the shoulder, with the other hand he held the bottle, the sharp glass pointed to Barrel's throat.
'No don't do that' Flute Stick protected. 'You'll make a mess.'
'Bash his brains in' Carrot suggested.
'Strangle him' Blunkit added.
'Hold on' Barrel protested, but his words were cut short when Woodworm struck him.
Barrel stumbled back, landing heavily on the floor. 'You call that a hit?' he complained, crawling away from Woodworm and heaving himself up using the empty wine rack as support.
'Kill me properly.'
Farrell sighed wearily as he listened listlessly to the sounds of Woodworm trying to feebly beat Barrel to death.
'You're doing it wrong' Flute Stick whined. 'Here let me help.'
Farrell closed his eyes, wishing for it all to go away. Behind he heard the sounds of Flute Stick, Blunkit, Carrot and Woodworm slowly pummelling Barrel to death as he lay curled up on the floor. The only one who wasn't taking part in the long drawn out murder was Flunkit, who sat near Farrell by the bars of the cell, staring out towards the stairs. The exit.
Farrell contemplated saying something to Flunkit, but changed him mind quickly after, choosing instead to remain silent.
Suddenly the door above them opened, and Sonya appeared.

‘What are you doing to him?’ she whimpered at the sight of Barrel on the floor.
‘Is he dead?’ Carrot asked.
Flute Stick shoved his head with his foot, staring down at him closely. ‘He’s still breathing’ he said. ‘I'm exhausted. We’ll have to try again later.’
Woodworm turned to Sonya, reaching his hand towards her pathetically. ‘Did you bring us some food?’ he whimpered in a distant voice.
‘No.’
‘Why not?’
‘I'm going to let you all out’ she said.
Woodworm’s eyes instantly lit up. ‘Really?’ he said hopefully, feeling suddenly full of life.

Upstairs Olithia woke from her sleep. She left the bedroom, heading downstairs to the kitchen to satisfy a growing hunger. On the way, she hesitated, noticing the wall just inside the kitchen doors where the keys were hung. Something was missing. It was the key to the cellar, the one the prisoners were kept.

‘I heard my mistress talking to her husband today’ Sonya explained in a hushed voice. ‘She asked the prince what he plans to do with you. He said he’s decided to kill you all…tomorrow.’
‘What time of day is it?’ Woodworm asked her as if he hadn’t heard what Tristan planned to do to them.
‘It’s night-time’ Sonya replied. ‘It’s very late. My mistress would be in bed by now.’
‘Why have you decided to help us then?’ Farrell asked her flatly.
‘Because of one small step of courage’ Sonya said smiling weakly to Flunkit. The action seemed to be unfamiliar to her. ‘I *want* to be free.’
‘You made the right choice’ Flunkit told her urgently. ‘But you must hurry.’
Sonya drew a small key from her person, sticking it in the lock and turning.
The door swung open.
‘Wait’ Sonya whispered urgently to the others as they hurried past her, out of the cell and heading towards the stairs. ‘What about *him*?’
The others hesitated, staring down at Barrel who lay on the floor still, seemingly knocked out but alive.
‘Leave him’ Woodworm said.
‘What?’ Sonya hissed.
‘We can’t take him with us. And we can’t hang around here’ Woodworm added. ‘We have to get out of here.’
Sonya glanced uncertainly back at the still form of Barrel on the floor. She hesitated briefly before turning away to follow the others up the stairs, leaving the cell door open, and Barrel where he lay.

‘I'm not familiar with this place’ Flunkit said when they had reached the top of the stairs. ‘Where are we?’

‘Quickly’ Sonya told them, skipping lightly past. ‘Follow me, but you must be quiet, my mistress is a light sleeper.’
Sonya led the six of them down the dark corridor, all of them keeping as silent as possible as they made their way. On several occasions Sonya whispered to the others to stay where they were, creeping forwards to check the rooms and make sure they were clear before proceeding. They walked in single file after her, glancing from side to side at the adjacent corridors, scared that someone was going to emerge from one of the rooms or corridors at any moment and find them. But no one did, it seemed that they were the only ones awake.
Or at least it seemed that way at first.
When Sonya rounded the final corner leading to the front door, she faltered, seeing a figure standing before her, a figure that had been waiting for her.
‘Hello Sonya’ Olithia purred. ‘Fancy a late-night walk did we?’
Sonya’s heart dropped to her feet, and she instantly paled, feeling nothing but stone cold.
The others behind her came around the corner, slowing to a stop they stared at Olithia uncertainly.
‘My my’ Olithia continued. ‘You lot are becoming quite a hindrance.’ She leant back on the front door, resting on the handle. ‘This door is locked by the way’ she said casually. ‘It’s usually left open, but I'm sure Sonya already told you all that.’ She fixed the terrified handmaiden with a cold hard stare. ‘Didn’t you?’
Sonya whimpered pathetically, her breath quickening as Olithia took several steps forwards, coming to stand before her.
‘What did they promise you?’ Olithia asked in a deadly voice. ‘Freedom? You won’t get it.’
Something inside Sonya snapped then. Her face contorted in rage as she made a lunge for Olithia, intending to attack her, to hurt her, and release all the anger that had been bottled up inside her for all these years. All the suffering and pain and fear. But Olithia grabbed Sonya’s hand in which she held the knife, hands clasped around the weapon, keeping Sonya’s hand closed and forcing the point away. Sonya screamed in both fury and terror, struggling with Olithia who still held her tight in her grasp. Sonya whipped around to the others, still caught by her mistress in the struggle.
‘Run!’ she screamed. ‘Run!’
They scattered.
‘Sonya!’ Flunkit hesitated, moving forwards towards her.
‘Go!’ she screamed at him, struggling with Olithia who refused to let go
‘Come on brother’ Blunkit urged him, grabbing his arm roughly and pulling him back. ‘We have to go!’
Upstairs, Tristan heard Sonya scream, heard the commotion downstairs. Throwing back the sheets he tore down the corridor towards where the sound had come from. When he reached the front door, he saw Olithia holding a knife and standing over Sonya, who lay curled up and terrified on the ground.
‘Olithia’ Tristan said rushing up to her. ‘Are you alright? Are you hurt?’
‘I'm fine’ she said pushing him gently away and smiling.
‘Why are you holding a knife?’
‘She attacked me’ Olithia said glancing down at Sonya casually as if nothing serious had happened.

Tristan rounded on Sonya with a snarl, pure rage filling his heart and soul.
‘You would harm my wife and child?’ he spat.
Sonya trembled beneath him in horror.
‘She helped the others escape’ Olithia told Tristan calmly. ‘They're gone.’

Tristan tried to look for them, but they were already gone, escaped through several different windows and doors after they had scattered.
They were now lost in the night.
Tristan returned to the cellar. It stank, and the air was heavy.
Creeping down the stairs Tristan saw a single figure lying face down inside the cell. He reluctantly entered, turning the figure over with a foot, and saw to his surprise that the man was still alive.
‘The others have escaped’ Tristan told Barrel. ‘They left you.’
Barrel blinked in confusion back up at Tristan, trying to understand what had happened and what he was saying.
‘How are you still alive?’ Tristan asked Barrel, noticing the state of him, the malnourishment, the fact that he had for some strange reason been attacked and beaten by the others he had shared his cell with.
Barrel did not answer him.
‘You know where the others have escaped to, where they are heading from here’ Tristan said to him. ‘I will let you live if you tell me where they are.’
Tristan waited for an answer.
‘Will you help me?’
Barrel closed his mouth, swallowing hard. His dry throat felt sore as he did so.
‘Yes’ Barrel rasped. ‘I will.’

Days later

‘What happened to you?’ Shawn exclaimed at the sight of them. ‘You all look like death.’
‘Oh Shawn’ Farrell groaned. ‘It was horrible.’
The six of them once they had escaped, had spent several hours trying to find each other. After that, the small group had travelled on foot back to the town where Arlen, Shawn and Annabel waited, along the way they had stolen food from wherever they could to find. There wasn’t much, but it was enough to keep them going.
‘To think that I've been reduced to stealing just to stay alive’ Farrell moaned unhappily at one point, as they lingered on the edges of a small village.
‘Oh you’ll get over it’ Blunkit had said dismissively. ‘We all need to do what we must to survive, and we need it more than they do’ he said, indicating the peasants that cowered from them.
Even without weapons, even in a state of malnourishment, the mercenaries were intimidating, perhaps even more so in their state of hunger. They were driven now by primal instinct, the need to live, to survive; to eat.

Woodworm snarled at a nearby child, and the boy had instantly burst into tears, running away in the opposite direction from his mother whom he had been clinging to.
It was no surprise that when they did finally return, Arlen, Shawn and Annabel were all shocked at the sight of them.
'We were captured' Blunkit explained more specifically, speaking to Shawn. 'For days we were trapped behind bars.'
'How did you escape?' Arlen asked them all in a level tone.
'We had some help' Carrot replied, speaking in his accent. 'But…I'm afraid we lost Barrel.'
'What are you talking about?' Arlen asked them raising an eyebrow. 'He's right here' he said indicating behind him.
The others looked past Arlen, their gaunt faces with mouths open in shock. Sitting atop a fine horse was Barrel. Beside him sat Tristan, mounted on his own white steed. Annabel nervously clung to Shawn at the sight of the prince, keeping her guard up.
'Barrel?!' Woodworm exclaimed. 'You're alive!' But his joy at the sight of him was short lived. 'How could you lead *him* here?' he said accusingly, pointing a finger at Tristan.
'How could you leave me behind?' Barrel replied calmly.
'We've just arrived here' Tristan told the others casually. 'It took a while for Barrel to heal. When we eventually got going, our journey was pleasant. We took our time.' He glanced at Barrel. 'He was only too happy to help me find you. I couldn't be sure if you had moved onto another town.'
'It's true' Barrel added. 'I was only too happy to help.'
'Traitor' Woodworm snarled under his breath, glaring up at Barrel.
Barrel smirked down at him. Beside him Tristan gave a signal. Instantly soldiers, bearing the crest of the prince, a wolf running up a mountain, stepped out from the alleyways adjacent to the road they stood on. The soldiers grabbed them roughly, subduing them and forcing them to their knees.
'Leave the girl' Tristan called over the heads of his men. 'And the other two' he added, meaning Shawn and Arlen.
The three were quickly released; Annabel composed herself as Shawn rounded on Tristan.
'What are you doing?!'
'You're going to kill us aren't you?' Farrell asked, glaring up at Tristan, hands behind his back as he was held by two soldiers. He leant away from the knife the soldier behind him held, wondering briefly what it must feel like running across his throat.
'Kill that one first please' Arlen said politely to Tristan as he pointed at Farrell.
'Arlen stop!' Shawn shot at him.
'You came all this way just to kill us?' Flute Stick asked incredulous. 'Why waste your time?'
'I'm going to find Amaia' Tristan explained. 'I have to get rid of you before you cause me anymore hindrance. You'll just get in the way and cause complications.'
'That would not sit well with her' Carrot called out loudly.
'She will never know' Tristan said. He spoke to Farrell now. 'It will be like you never existed. She is my daughter after all.'
'You're wrong!' Arlen snapped, unable to keep silent now. 'She is *not* your daughter.'

Shawn froze in terror, realising what was happening. Annabel curled her fists; she raised her head, shoulders hunched. Beside her Shawn quickly took her by the hand, eyes wide and shaking his head at her.
'Don't do it' he whispered, and Annabel relaxed slightly, easing her mind away from her magic, though remaining alert.
'She is *my* daughter' Arlen snarled fearlessly at the prince. 'I will find her, and when I do, I will keep her safe. And away from *you*.'
Tristan stared coolly back at Arlen. He then spoke to one of his men.
'Kill him.'
Arlen rounded on the soldier who whipped out a bow and arrow, quickly drawing it and ready to fire at Arlen in the chest at point-blank range.
'No!' Shawn screamed, grabbing the bow the soldier held and forcing it away from Arlen.
'You would dare to interfere?' Tristan asked Shawn in exasperation as he was thrown to the ground on his back, staring up at the soldier who had rearmed himself and was pointing the arrow at *him* now, the bow drawn and ready to fire.
A second later, vines shot up through the cracks in the paving at their feet at impossible speeds, shooting through the air and winding around the bow and arrow that threatened to kill Shawn.
'Annabel no!'
The soldiers now rounded on Annabel, who stood there calmly controlling her magic. The bow and arrow the soldier held was forced downwards, harmless now and entangled in the vines. The archer cried out in alarm as the vines began to wind around *him* too. He fought against them, struggling to free himself from them as they began to swarm over him, pulling him to his knees and winding around his chest and neck.
Behind Annabel, one of the soldiers attacked, striking her hard across the back of the head. She fell forwards on her hands and knees, fighting to stay conscious.
Tristan laughed in disbelief at the situation. 'Should I just kill all of you?' he asked no one in particular as Shawn crawled over to Annabel, holding her head in his hands.
'If you kill us you will never find Amaia' Arlen said evenly, the only one still standing now.
'And why is that?' Tristan asked.
Arlen lifted his heavy black painted eyes from the ground, blinking slowly as if he was merely bored and hadn't just nearly been killed. 'It will take all of us to find her.'
'I can find her myself' Tristan argued.
'You're doing a pretty good job of it so far.'
'Barrel do something!' Woodworm called out to him.
'Why?' Barrel sang back. 'You all left me to die.'
'I saved your life' Woodworm said through gritted teeth. 'Does that mean nothing to you?'
Barrel shrugged. 'And then you left me to die. It cancels it out.'
'So this is revenge?' Woodworm snarled. 'What do you think will happen to you after we are killed?'
'I will let him go' Tristan said to him.
'You see' Barrel nodded to the prince. 'Everything will work out in the end…well…for me anyway.'
'And you trust him?!' Woodworm called. 'How can you be so fucking stupid?!'

‘What do you mean?’ Barrel asked.
‘You know about Weather Makers. How can he let you live?’
‘Ah.’ Barrel said.
‘Barrel has no reason to cause me more grief’ Tristan explained simply. ‘I will let him live.’
‘Oh yeah’ Woodworm chuckled humourlessly. ‘You’ve been nothing but honest with us so far.’
‘He’s right’ Annabel added, sitting up and holding her aching head. ‘He’s a liar. A liar! He will kill us all!’
‘No!’ Woodworm roared in fury, fighting in vain against the hands that held him down. ‘I can’t die! I can’t meet *her* again!’
‘Don’t struggle’ Tristan sighed wearily. ‘You’ll only make it worse for yourself.’
‘How could this get any worse?!’ Woodworm hollered back.
‘Well’ Blunkit said casually. ‘I'm glad to see at least you're ok Barrel.’
‘You too’ Barrel laughed hysterically back. ‘I do feel sad that this is the last we’ll see of each other. I was just getting fond of you.’
‘You're really going to kill us?’ Flunkit asked.
‘I'm getting tired of this’ Tristan spoke turning to one of the soldiers. ‘Just hurry up and ki-’
‘Wait!’ Farrell shouted over the command.
‘Don’t bother. I planned to kill you before you escaped. But that wretched servant heard me say this. That’s why she let you go. If she hadn’t…you would all been dead by now, and I would have been saved the trouble of coming all the way out here and dealing with this nonsense.’
‘What?’ Flunkit spoke up. ‘You mean it was true what she said? She really saved our lives?’
‘Oh yes’ Tristan spoke in a drone.
‘What happened to her? Where is she?’ Flunkit asked desperately.
‘She’s dead.’
‘Dead?’
‘She attacked my wife’ Tristan explained.
‘I thought you didn’t care about your wife’ Blunkit asked in a level tone.
‘She is pregnant with my child.’
‘But I thought you said you didn’t care if we kidnapped her’ Blunkit went on.
‘I lied. Sort of. I care more for my unborn son or daughter than her.’
‘But what happened to Sonya?’ Flunkit asked Tristan loudly.
‘She’s been hung.’
The colour slowly drained out of Flunkit’s face.
‘Now are you going to die quietly and without fuss?’ Tristan asked them. ‘I really would like to get home and sleep in my own bed.’
‘Wait’ Farrell spoke again, quieter now. ‘I think we can help each other. We are both looking for Amaia. We stand a better chance of finding her if we work together.’
‘How do you work this out?’ Tristan asked.
‘Well…’ Farrell began, choosing his words carefully. ‘There was once a time when I was the most honoured soldier in the kingdom.’
‘That was a long time ago.’
‘Are you saying that means nothing?’

‘I'm saying’ Tristan continued patiently, ‘that was a long time ago. You are not as good as you could be.’
‘Those are fine words’ Farrell went on, ‘coming from one who is thirteenth in line to the throne.’ He fell silent, letting the information sink in. ‘Neither of us are *as good as we could be*, but if we work together, we have a better chance of finding her than if we were alone.’ He waited a moment. ‘Don’t you agree?’
Tristan threw his head back then, laughing to the sky. ‘Those are very fine words’ he said. ‘You make a convincing argument.’
‘So you’ll let us go?’ Farrell asked hopefully.
Tristan let out a heavy sigh as his laughter ended. He thought for a moment before answering. ‘Alright’ he said. ‘You’ve convinced me. Let them go’ he said to his men.
‘Get off me’ Woodworm instantly snapped, jerking away from the soldiers that held him down and rising quickly to his feet, glaring at everyone.
Farrell straightened as he rose, breathing a sigh of relief. ‘So, we work together then?’ he asked.
‘Yes’ Tristan gave a nod. ‘We work together.’
‘Then where do we start?’ Arlen grumbled.
Beside him Shawn helped Annabel to her feet; she wobbled a bit, holding her head tenderly where the soldier had hit her. But she seemed for the most part to be alright.
‘There is much you do not know’ Tristan told the group, ‘much that I must explain. I have to show you something.’
‘What is it?’ Farrell asked.
‘It’s a long way from here. You will need your horses. You must prepare to leave now.’
‘Where do we go?’ Arlen asked Tristan. ‘And why?’
‘To a small village north of here, you’ll see why.’
‘I'm not going’ Flunkit spoke up.
‘What?’ his brother asked turning to him. ‘But why?’
‘Sonya’ he said weakly. ‘I must find her.’
‘She is dead’ Tristan told him heartlessly.
‘I don’t believe it’ Flunkit said glaring. There were tears in his eyes.
‘Go and find her yourself if you don’t believe me.’
‘I will’ Flunkit snarled. ‘I will find her, and keep her safe.’
‘Good luck’ Tristan frowned.
‘She can’t be dead’ Flunkit said. ‘She has to be alive.’
He turned from the others, walking away and mumbling to himself.
‘Wait’ Farrell said to Blunkit as he turned to leave also, following his brother. Blunkit hesitated. ‘That story you told me’ Farrell began, ‘about the boy you killed. It isn’t true is it? You are not as heartless as you say.’
Blunkit didn’t answer; he only stared back at him.
‘Goodbye’ he said finally. ‘We will not meet again.’
‘And so, we lose two of our company’ Flute Stick sighed, watching the brothers depart.
Farrell looked about them at those that were left. There was himself, Arlen, Shawn and Annabel, the Weather Maker. The four mercenaries that were left, Barrel, Woodworm, Carrot and Flute Stick. And then there was Tristan the prince, and all his men.

Farrell thought then what a strange direction their journey had taken.
'Let's hurry up.' Tristan spoke loudly to the others. 'There's no point in hanging around here anymore.'

Chapter Thirty-Three
The Broken Village

The group rode north across the land in the company of the prince. Led by Tristan and his soldiers, Farrell, Arlen and the others continued silently on their way, rarely speaking to one another, and wondering in their heads where they were being taken.
The journey took several days, and was uneventful. When they arrived at their destination, they were shocked by what they saw. The village they had come to had been completely destroyed.
'What on earth happened here?' Annabel gasped in astonishment at the sight of it all.
The place was utterly deserted. The houses had been burned to the ground, their thatched roofs had quickly caught fire, leaving little behind other than blackened charred remained of a life that once was. Amongst the wreckage that was still smoking, could be seen evidence of life that had continued normally, until suddenly everything changed. Within one of the houses they passed, could be seen a table that had somehow managed to survive. Upon it were several plates, with meals half-finished. And amongst and within the houses all around, bodies lay; even some of the animals had been killed.
'It's a terrible thing that's happened here' Tristan said dismounting his horse. 'These people' he looked around him, 'they did not deserve this.'
'How did you know this was here?' Carrot asked the prince suspiciously. 'Did you kill these people?'
'I did not' Tristan replied. 'Look at the houses. They still smoulder. No, this attack happened recently. I've been travelling with you long enough now.'
'Did your men kill these people?' Carrot clarified.
'No' Tristan answered shortly.
'But you still knew about it' Flute Stick said, glaring at him. 'How *is* that?'
Tristan took a deep breath as if about to speak, but then merely sighed, staring at the ground in thought.
'You withhold information again' Annabel told him in displeasure. 'I knew we couldn't trust you.'
'It's' not that' Tristan replied. 'It's just…. I don't know how best to explain.'
'Shhh' Barrel suddenly hissed. 'Do you hear that? What's that sound?'
The others fell silent to listen. They heard the strange noise again.
'Is that……a baby?' Arlen whispered incredulous.
The others all turned in the direction of the noise. Tristan looked on silently.
'What in the name of the gods…?' Arlen walked forwards towards one of the houses. The others followed him, the prince's armoured soldiers trailed afterwards.

Inside, the house was a smouldering wreck. The air was still thick with smoke. The stairs had collapsed and most of what lay inside was left beyond recognition.
Annabel followed closely after Arlen, stepping over the blackened remains of the beams that had once held up the ceiling.
'Careful' Shawn hissed after her. 'It's dangerous.'
She paused to look back at him; before continuing onwards, covering her mouth and coughing as she went. The crying baby she found had been hidden in a cupboard on the ground floor, tucked away in a corner.
Annabel reached forwards into the cupboard, taking the child in her arms. She rose with her back to the others, turning to face them.
It was a little girl she held.
There was movement suddenly to one side. A groan, a hand reaching up, a piece of wood was knocked over.
Tristan came up behind the others, spotting an old man who had suddenly made himself known.
'Strangers' he moaned in agony, propping himself up on his elbow. 'You…you are not the bad ones…?'
'Bad ones?' Annabel repeated, holding the still crying child tenderly in her arms.
'What happened here old man?' Woodworm asked, kneeling beside him.
'We tried to protect her' the figure said, clutching a wound at his side and grimacing as he spoke. 'We tried to protect her, but he didn't like it…. instead…he killed us all…and took her anyway.'
'Who?' Woodworm asked impatiently. 'Who attacked this place?'
'The king.'
'The king?' Woodworm echoed.
Arlen glanced sideways towards the prince. 'I think you've got some explaining to do.'
'Why should we not just kill you now you lying bastard?' Woodworm snarled up at him.
'My soldiers outnumber you' Tristan answered simply. 'If I had wanted a fight, I could have killed you all easily without bothering to lead you all this way.'
'Then explain yourself' Farrell said to him. 'Why would your father do such a thing?'
'He is searching for Weather Makers' Tristan told them.
'Why?'
'It's...difficult to explain.'
'Then I will do the explaining' the old man interrupted. He forced himself to sit up, his body tense in agony. He pushed himself back to lean against the wall, letting out a deep sigh. He then faced Annabel who held the baby, speaking to her.
'That girl is my granddaughter.'
'What happened here?' Annabel asked him. 'Why is everyone dead? Why did the king do this?'
'My daughter' the old man began, 'her mother' he indicated the baby, 'is a Weather Maker. The king wanted her, but she's much loved in this little village, the people stood up to defend her…and they paid for it with their lives.'
'Why does the king want Weather Makers?' Farrell asked him.

‘I don’t know’ the old man shook his head. ‘He just took her, and killed anyone who got in his way…and then he killed everyone else….’ The old man gritted his teeth, before continuing. ‘He took her, and now she’s gone. I don’t know where she is, or if I will ever see her again…but I'm thinking that if the king was so desperate to get a hold of her…she must be important in some way.’ He lifted his head to the others hopefully. ‘Maybe she is still alive…. maybe….’ he let out a deep sigh. His shoulders sagged, and his eyes became distant.
The old man was dead.
‘Care to fill in the gaps?’ Carrot said to Tristan.
Tristan sighed reluctantly.
‘My mother is a Weather Maker. Both my parents since the day they met have been infatuated with each other; they loved each other dearly, and would go to the ends of the earth for the other. But one day my mother…. something happened to her. I don’t know what, but she fell into a coma. She just…’ he shrugged, ‘collapsed one day, and has never woken since. That was over thirty years ago. Now she sleeps in a great hall. My father believes that because she is a Weather Maker, only another Weather Maker can save her, and make her the way she was before.’
‘Why?’ Farrell asked.
Tristan shrugged.
‘There is no reason for him to believe what he believes. He is a powerful man driven to madness by grief. His wife…my mother…means the world to him, and he will do anything he can to save her. But he doesn’t know how, so has decided…. that the Weather Makers *do* know how to save her.’
‘That is why he’s been kidnapping them’ Arlen spoke slowly. ‘That is why Amaia…...’ he broke off. ‘What happens to the Weather Makers that are taken?’
‘I don’t know’ Tristan said. ‘I saved Amaia before he could take her, and kept her safe for as long as I could. I don’t know what he does with them.’
‘You know’ Woodworm said, ‘you could have just told us rather than bring us all this way.’
‘And what better evidence than what you see before you, what you see with your own eyes. If I hadn’t brought you here, you would have been less inclined to believe my words.’
‘So, the woman who was taken from this village’ Shawn asked the prince, ‘was a Weather Maker?’
Tristan gave a slow nod. ‘Yes.’
‘How did you know this place would be attacked?’ Flute Stick asked him.
‘Because…’ Tristan answered, ‘the king is my father. I know much of what he does.’
‘And you didn’t do anything to stop it?’ Annabel asked.
Tristan gave her a sceptical look. ‘He is the king’ Tristan said firmly to her, sounding slightly irritated. ‘What could I have done?’
Annabel pursed her lips. She bowed her head.
‘Poor child’ she said sadly to the baby, who was quiet now. ‘What should we do with her?’
‘We should just kill it’ Woodworm said.
‘Why are you such an asshole?’ Flute Stick asked him.
‘I know why’ Annabel spoke up before Woodworm could reply. ‘It’s because you're heartbroken.’
The strange statement, so out of place, made all of them fall silent.

‘Is it because she died?’ Annabel asked, striking out at a guess. ‘The woman you loved?’
Woodworm narrowed his eyes.
‘She didn’t die’ he replied in a flat tone. ‘She left me for another man.’
‘Amazing’ Arlen said to Annabel. ‘How could you tell?’
‘I could tell’ Annabel replied simply. ‘My brother was left heartbroken years ago when his wife died in childbirth. He was not the same after that. He died shortly after……. The grief was too much for him to bear. He took his own life.’
‘I'm sorry.’
‘Time has a way of numbing the pain’ Annabel answered, not looking at him.
‘You're wasting our time’ Farrell said to the prince. ‘We should be looking for Amaia.’
‘Amaia has been missing for years’ Tristan replied, ‘for you at least. You can do little more time wasting than you’ve already done.’
‘So, what do we do to get her back?’ Arlen asked Tristan, ignoring Farrell who ground his teeth in anger at the prince.
‘My father is kidnapping Weather Makers all across the kingdom. The only way to stop him, is to stand against my father….in war.’
‘Oh gods’ Shawn said, slapping himself in the face. ‘That is what Danior said in the beginning. Do you remember? He was right all along. He said our path would lead to war.’
‘So how should we proceed?’ Farrell asked.
‘Well’ Tristan began. ‘I am only the thirteenth son. I am not as good as I could be.’ He raised his head. ‘We need to recruit men, an army….it will take some time. My father is a resourceful man obviously, being the king. We need an army large enough to stand a chance against his. We have to defeat him, and find Amaia as fast as possible.’ He glanced down at the old man deceased at his feet. ‘But first’ he said turning to Annabel who held the baby, ‘we need to find a new mother for this child, someone who will care for her.’
Arlen balled his fists, feeling a flurry of strange and mixed emotions within him.
‘I feel in a way that we are closer now’ he said to the air. ‘I think that we might just stand a chance, even against the king.’
‘That is the plan’ Tristan nodded. ‘But…it will be a long road to walk.’

Ten months pass

Chapter Thirty-Four
Eerily on the Night

Arlen stormed forwards through the crowd. The soldiers either side of him parted to let him pass; and he stepped forward into the open space to face the commotion.

‘What is the meaning of this?’ he demanded, seeing what was before him. ‘Put your weapons down’ he ordered the soldiers. ‘Now!’
The soldiers that had been surrounding the two figures, keeping them in place with their swords and spears pointed towards them, backed down on his command, but they did not break the circle they held to trap the figures in place.
One of the figures was a young woman, perhaps about nineteen or twenty in age. She had blonde hair, short and scruffy; it looked as if she had cut it herself. She was very slender, and pale, looking as if she had not eaten properly in days, and she had signs of torture shown clearly on her body. Across her bare shoulders and arms, could be seen scars, cuts and burns, and sections where the skin looked as if it had been peeled away. She glared at Arlen, and at all the men around them, with a look of hatred and anger in her eyes.
Her companion, a male figure, taller and muscular, stood by her side. Unlike the young woman, he looked fit and healthy as he towered over her. In his hand he held a sword, lifted high. He stood close to the woman by his side, glancing constantly at her, then back at the men that surrounded them, before glancing at her again.
Arlen had the sudden impression that the two meant a lot to one another, perhaps they shared a history.
‘I said put your weapons down’ Arlen ordered his soldiers. ‘Don’t make me say it again!’
The young woman turned towards him, hissing as the surrounding men obeyed his command.
‘Are you in charge then?’ she spat at him. ‘Let us go’ she demanded. ‘I will give you *nothing*.’
‘I'm sorry’ Arlen spoke kindly to her, raising his hands in submission. ‘We mean you no harm. We are on a quest to find a Weather Maker.’
Her demeanour changed. It was only subtle, and Arlen would have missed it had he not been watching her closely. But he saw it. He saw the slight frown, the way her cheek had twitched, and how her body had relaxed, ever so slightly.
The male companion beside her cast her a glance. He was silent, as he held the sword still raised.
‘I don’t know what you're talking about’ the woman said to him.
‘Reports tell me that you have killed three of my men’ Arlen said calmly. ‘I don’t mean to harm you. I only want to know the truth.’
‘There was something wrong with them if they allowed themselves to be killed by a girl’ she snarled at him.
‘My men said they were turned inside out’ Arlen said calmly to her. ‘That is a particularly nasty power. I am somewhat familiar with Weather Makers. Come on. Let’s not play this game. I know what you are.’
‘You will get…*nothing* from me’ the woman hissed.
‘At least tell me your name’ Arlen said patiently.
‘*Nothing*!’
Arlen let out an exasperated sigh.
‘I need your help’ he said, trying one last time. ‘My daughter is a Weather Maker, and has been kidnapped by the king. We found you only because we were looking for her. Please. Is there *anything* you can tell me that may be of some help?’
She bared her teeth at him,

‘Let me go’ the woman ordered him. ‘I would rather die than be imprisoned.’
Beside the woman, her silent guardian glared at Arlen, tightening his grip slightly on the hilt of his sword.
Arlen let out another sigh, his shoulders sagging in disappointment.

He stood on the hilltop of their camp minutes later, watching the young Weather Maker and her mysterious, silent guardian walk quickly away, moments later swallowed by the trees that grew nearby.
‘Do you think she knew anything?’ one of the soldiers asked beside him.
‘Who knows?’ Arlen mumbled. ‘Maybe she did.’
‘We should have pressed her’ the soldier said firmly.
‘No’ Arlen shook his head. ‘Did you see her? No’ he said again. ‘She would never have told us either way.’
The soldier looked past Arlen, towards the forest the pair had slipped into.
‘You think she escaped from the king’s prisons?’ the soldier asked.
‘It’s most likely’ Arlen replied.
The soldier sighed then. ‘I wonder how the others are doing.’

Annabel stumbled forwards. The shackles around her wrists were tight and hurt her; though she was grateful she did not have shackles around her ankles too, like some of the others did.
The man holding the other end of the chain the shackles were attached to jerked on them again, pulling her towards him as he strode forwards.
‘Keep up’ the guard snapped back at her without bothering to turn.
Annabel glanced about the narrow corridor at the walls around her. It was a dim place she had found herself in. The burning torches held in brackets on the wall showed her the flickering scenes of horrible things. The place was so overcrowded, there were even some imprisoned in the corridors themselves. Some in cages, others with their arms and legs chained and simply left to sleep and waste away on the solid stone floor, some with bags over their heads so they could not see, which only added to their already heightened fear.
Annabel stumbled again.
‘If I have to tell you one more time, I shall kill you myself’ the guard snapped again, this time pausing to glare at her.
Annabel avoided his gaze, instead looking down at her feet, like so many of the submissive and fearful people imprisoned around her had adopted as habit. But he need not carry out this threat, for they had arrived where the guard had intended.
At the end of the corridor, was a heavy door with rusted metal studs set in the wood, and a small window at head height that from the other side could be opened and closed by a sliding panel. The guard knocked on the door and waited. Seconds later, the panel slid across and a face appeared.
The panel closed again; there was another pause, and the sound of a bolt sliding across was heard.
The door swung open.
‘Come in’ said an elder voice; and Annabel was dragged forwards again and into room.

Taking in her surroundings briefly she saw it was an office of some sorts, and not a pleasant one at that. Amongst the various torture devices displayed around the room were bookshelves and cupboards, even a drinks cabinet. There was a heavy desk set against the wall at one end, a tall backed chair, and many burning candles to keep the darkness at bay, as there were no windows.
'Now what problems do you present me with today?' the elder gentleman asked the guard curtly.
The elder gentleman who had spoken must have been in his forties or thereabouts, rugged, a little worn with some scaring about his face. He dressed well, but at a glance, Annabel saw no keys visible on him, just a bulge at his chest where they might have been. He wore a high-necked shirt Annabel noted, and chainmail. Annabel recognised him as the guards master.
'This one has been causing trouble with the others' the guard told him.
'Well' the guards master replied looking her Annabel, 'of course she would cause trouble. It's not often we get women here. Half of the men here are rapists; the other half would happily beat a sick child if they could. Did you put her in a separate cell? Or at least segregate her?'
'We've not the space sir' the guard answered back.
'You could have at least chained her up outside somewhere.'
'Nowhere available at the moment sir.'
The guards master sighed wearily, as if this were all a great burden for him.
'It matters not' he said at last. 'We're having a clear out soon anyway. We will have cells to spare then. What is your crime?' he spoke to Annabel.
Annabel glanced towards him cautiously, but did not speak.
'The master asked you a question' the guard growled viciously before backhanding her hard.
Annabel stumbled again, but once again was pulled back by the guard that held the end of the chain.
The guards master held a hand carefully up to the guard, giving him a warning through his eyes. The guard stepped back, but continued to hold the chain tightly.
'I asked you a question' the guards master said to her. 'Do not make me repeat it.'
'B-blasphemy' Annabel began.
'Hmph' he replied, stepping away and turning his back on her. 'Funny' he said.
'Sir?' the guard spoke up uncertainly.
'Funny I said' the guards master repeated. 'It's funny how you could be imprisoned simply for speaking a few words.'
'Dangerous words' the guard shot a glare at Annabel before hitting her again.
Annabel fell to the floor this time as her knees gave way.
The guard kicked her while she was down, once…. twice…. his metal-tipped boots driving painfully into her.
'Enough' the guards master spoke lazily.
'Sorry sir' the guard said straightening up, 'got a bit carried away.' He immediately glared at Annabel again. 'The witch should be burned.'
'You take too much pleasure in this' the guards master noted. 'Get her up.'
Annabel tensed as the guard grabbed her roughly, hauling her to her feet. Annabel groaned in pain, hunched over and hugging her belly where she had been kicked.

‘Take her shackles off.’
‘Sir?’
‘Do, don’t ask’ the guards master said briskly. ‘You know how much I hate repeating myself.’
The guard grumbled under his breath as he did what he was told, stepping back when he was done and falling silent.
‘What is your name?’ the guards master asked.
‘Annabel…’
‘Speak up’ the master said loudly. ‘You are not a mouse.’
‘Annabel’ she said clearer now.
‘Nice name. You may leave us now’ he said to the guard.
‘But sir…!’
‘But what?’ the guards master answered back. ‘I gave you an order.’
‘But she’s…’
‘Dangerous?’ the guards master asked.
‘Untrustworthy’ the guard finished. ‘She will stab you in the back at the first chance she gets. Don’t let her deceive you.’
‘You think I can’t handle an unarmed girl?’ the guards master sneered. ‘You insult me. Get out of my sight.’
The guard fumbled, stammered a few inaudible words, before nodding his head and leaving swiftly, cursing and muttering under his breath.
‘What a tedious man’ the master sighed once the guard had gone. ‘I find him most tiresome, most tiresome indeed.’
He looked to Annabel, who stared away from him at the floor in the corner of the room.
‘You are not a servant’ the man told her. ‘You can look at me.’
Annabel turned her head towards him, meeting his gaze.
The guards master leant back against his desk, eyes travelling up and down her body.
He reached for a bottle nearby and poured the liquid into a glass.
Annabel immediately drew a sharp breath as he approached her.
‘I'm not going to hurt you’ the guards master said handing her the glass. ‘Please, drink this.’
Annabel did as she was told, the wine that ran down her throat was cool and refreshing.
‘I would say that I hope the others have treated you well’ he said taking the glass back from her. ‘But I know that would not be the case. I just hope they did not treat you too harshly.’
He moved closer to her, lifting her chin and looking into her face. She had a swollen lip and a black eye.
‘Hmm. I suppose I shouldn’t expect any less.’ He moved back, leaning on his desk once more. ‘You're not from around here are you?’ he said. ‘You have a foreign look about you.’
‘I…travelled here on a ship across the sea…with…some people….’ She said. ‘I was taken from my home….and…...’
‘You're not familiar with our customs’ the man said. ‘The people here are very protective of their beliefs. Some suffer horrible deaths just for not believing. But don’t worry. You're safe now.’
‘I…’ Annabel said. ‘I wish to see the sun. I have been underground in the dark for such a long time.’

‘It will be done’ the guards master waved casually at her. ‘We have a garden here, a beautiful one at that.’
‘You do?’
‘Of course,’ he nodded. ‘Many of us spend a long time working here; some of the guards even live here. We grow our own food, and when he have time to spare, we even grow flowers.’
‘I would love to see these flowers.’
‘Then follow me’ the guards master said straightening.

The garden was a pleasant enough experience, at least compared to the dank and overcrowded cell she had come from, it was a small paradise that grew in the centre of the prison.
The two walked slowly through the walled garden, though Annabel couldn’t help noticing the many figures standing in the arches around them. There were armed soldiers on foot at ground level, and in the windows higher up, guards carrying crossbows loaded and ready to fire.
‘This is a nice place’ Annabel commented, facing the guards master again.
‘I'm glad you like it’ he replied. ‘I come here often to collect my thoughts, especially on days like today when the sun is so beautiful. It helps our fruit and vegetables grow large and healthy.’
He picked an orange from a nearby tree, reaching his hand out towards her, offering Annabel the fruit.
‘Keep it’ Annabel said. ‘You will need it more than I do.’
‘What do you mean?’
‘I need more than that to get my strength back’ Annabel replied. ‘That right there’ she indicated the orange in his hand, ‘could be the last meal you ever have.’
A silence passed between them.
‘What?’ the guards master answered shortly.
‘I want you to call all your men down here.’
‘And why would I do that?’ he asked her, sounding amused now.
He lowered his hand. The orange fell from his fingers as he stared at her with a fixed expression.
Annabel in her head considered her options, though she dared not make a sudden move.
She giggled, showing her hands in submission. Annabel glided slowly towards him then with confidence, making sure he saw exactly what she was doing, smiling seductively as she moved closer; their faces inches apart. Her hand unseen slipped into his coat.
‘I know I have no power over you’ she purred to him. ‘I know you can do whatever you want with me. But could you do me one small favour and turn around…*please*?’
‘What is your plan?’ he asked her, though his voice was gentler than before.
‘That would spoil the secret’ she said. ‘It would spoil the *fun*.’
He grinned hungrily at her then, stepping back and turning around.
As soon as his back was turned, Annabel grabbed him roughly, holding him around the body with one hand, and with the other, she held to his throat the knife she had slipped from his

coat. She pulled him towards her, backing herself against the orange tree behind to give her some protection.
'What are you doing?' the guards master said in shock now. Clearly this was the last thing he had expected.
'I want you to call all your men down here' Annabel repeated, speaking in a harsh voice as she held him tight. '*All* of them.'
'That is against protocol' he answered evenly back. 'Even if I ordered them to do it, they would not be allowed. I have men higher above even me you know.'
'Then call who will come.'
'No need' the guards master answered, his body thoroughly relaxed. 'They are already on their way.'
And it was true, the many guards on foot had rushed forwards into the garden to defend their master, and more were coming behind them. Annabel counted about fifty, and that didn't include the archers in the windows above them. They had stayed firmly put, but now they had their crossbows aimed at *her*. They wouldn't shoot though, not yet anyway, for fear of hitting the guards master.
I should have known Annabel thought. She cursed to herself, looking back to the grounds around her at the men that surrounded. *No matter. I think I could still manage.*
'I must say' the guards master began. 'This has never happened before. What are you going to do now?'
'Shut up I'm thinking' Annabel shot back.
'No' the man replied quickly. 'I'm done with these games, though they've been fun.'
He jerked his head back sharply and without warning, head butting Annabel right on the nose. The guards master turned on her in one swift movement the second her hold on him had weakened, snatching the knife from her hand in one easy sweep.
He threw it up in the air and caught it several times, watching her with amusement as she clutched her bleeding nose.
'Now what were you thinking?' he asked her. 'You think you could really subdue me, a little girl against a fully-grown man?'
'I'm not a little girl' Annabel said into her hands.
'What do you plan to do now?'
'To ask you….no…*order* you to hand over your keys and release the prisoners' Annabel answered quickly back.
The guards master threw his head back, roaring with laughter.
'You are a funny one' he hollered. 'Here you stand surrounded by men that will kill you the instant I give the signal, and yet you try to *order* me to do…. what was it…..release the prisoners? Now why would you want a thing like that?' he sheathed his knife, narrowing his eyes curiously at her. 'What on earth are you thinking?'
'You'll find out' Annabel replied, holding her bleeding nose. She straightened up, facing him properly now, fresh blood smeared on her hands and face. 'That really hurt.'
'Good.'
'Hand over the keys' Annabel indicated the bulge on his chest beneath his shirt that was roughly key-shaped. 'Now please.'

‘I should throw you back in that filthy cell with all the rapists, see how you feel about things then, and you could reflect on your stupidity while you're being torn to shreds.’
Annabel sighed deeply, not at all intimidated by his threats. ‘This has been very sloppily done’ she said to herself, taking in her surroundings. ‘Oh well’ she shrugged. ‘Next time….’
She took a deep and steady breath.
Suddenly out of the ground at the guards master’s feet, roots and thick vines shot out and wrapped themselves around his legs, pinning him in place, causing him to cry out in alarm.
‘*Hand over the fucking keys!*’ Annabel screamed at him holding her hand out.
He didn’t hesitate now in doing so, and as Annabel snatched them from him, shouts came from all around them from the guards that surrounded.
‘Witch!’
‘Sorcery!’
‘Magic!’
The guards with the crossbows in the windows above them were hollering also, lifting their weapons and aiming.
‘If they shoot me you die’ Annabel told the guards master calmly. ‘Tell them to lower their weapons.’
The guards master snarled at her, regaining himself enough from the shock to begin to feel anger towards her. He turned around at much as he could with his legs pinned in place.
‘Don’t shoot’ he called reluctantly. ‘Everyone back down!’
The guards each took small steps back, and the crossbowman lowered their weapons slightly, but none relaxed.
‘Your man was right by the way’ Annabel told him. ‘You shouldn’t have trusted me.’ She spoke then to the nearest guard. ‘You! Take these keys and free the prisoners in the cell opposite the one I was kept in. You know which one that is?’
The guard hesitated. The guards master explained briefly which cell she meant and the guard nodded, understanding clearer now.
Annabel threw the keys to him so he would not have to come close to her. She waited for him to return.
Less than a minute later he did so, surrounded by a group of men and looking extremely uncomfortable. Annabel nodded acknowledgement to the small group of former prisoners; and to one in particular who was most familiar to her. Shawn who stood amongst them. But they did not enter the garden, not yet.
‘Now what?!’ the guards master demanded exasperated. ‘What on earth are you trying to accomplish here?’
Annabel spared him a knowing smile, before finishing what she started.
The guards master could only watch helplessly as terror and confusion was sown in the garden, as all the plants and trees thrashed around as if they had minds of their own.
It was like a nightmare. Huge roots shot up from the earth and slammed into bodies, grabbing individual men and hurling them into the air or against the solid stone walls, breaking their bones on impact. Even the archers in the windows were not safe, and could only scream and cry in horror as one by one they were slain. Great twisting vines shot out at them from all around, grabbing them around the torso and tightening until they suffocated. Or simply

entering their mouths and growing straight into their lungs, where they blossomed into large flowers.
The entire garden moved as if in a powerful hurricane, but the only wind that was created in the walled garden in the centre of the prison, was that created by the living plants themselves as they whipped around.
When it was all over mere seconds later, the garden returned to its peaceful state as if nothing had happened, leaving behind it blood and carnage. Broken bodies and death were everywhere.
The guards master froze as he saw the dead men all around him; he was suddenly speechless and pale as snow.
As soon as it was all over, Shawn, who had remained silently watching at the edge of the garden alongside the other former prisoners, ran towards Annabel. Behind him, Carrot and Flute Stick followed after. Carrot quickly grabbed the last guard that remained alive, the one that had let them out of their cell, and held him tightly around the neck until he stopped moving. The other men who had been freed wandered forwards aimlessly, staring at the scene around them in shock and disbelief.
'Annabel!' Shawn said when he reached her. 'Are you alright? I was so worried!'
He cupped her face as he spoke, fussing over her injuries. The blood had stemmed its flow on her face, but she was still covered in it.
'I'm fine' Annabel smiled encouragingly back. 'I'm sure though…. you've seen me looking better.'
'I'm sorry we had to put you through this.'
'It's fine already' Annabel said wearily. 'I told you several times I agreed to this.'
'But still…'
'Shush' she told him sternly.
They both turned their attention then onto the guards master, the only one remaining who was not among them.
'What should we do with him?' Annabel asked Shawn, watching the guards master who was now too shocked to be able to speak.
'We should kill him. It's not safe to let him live, especially since he's seen you use your powers.'
'I suppose' Annabel hummed. 'Still. He was good to me. Of a sort. For a short time at least.'
'His intentions were still wicked' Shawn replied coldly.
'Do you want me to do it?' Flute Stick asked them, appearing at their sides.
'If you don't mind' Shawn said. 'Carrot' he said to him. 'Why don't you free the other prisoners?'
'Are you still sure this is all a good idea?' Annabel asked Shawn as Carrot ran off to free the others, and Flute Stick began to slowly strangle the unfortunate guards master beside them.
'The guards master said they were all bad people' Annabel continued as she watched the man die.
'I'm sure we've been through this' Shawn told her. 'We need men enough to fight the king and save Amaia. Some here will be bad, but it's like you said, if in this country they are happy to imprison a woman just for voicing an opinion that doesn't sit well with others and force her to suffer for it…. well…. I bet half the people here at least are innocent.'

‘I suppose you're right’ Annabel said turning away from him. ‘I just can’t wait to sleep somewhere decent tonight. I’m desperate for a bath.’
‘Me too’ Shawn agreed.
‘This is all very impressive by the way’ Flute Stick butted in as he surveyed the scene around them, after he had strangled and thrown the now dead guards master to the floor.
All the earth and plants had returned to normal, and it looked like the garden had not been disturbed in any way. Besides from the bodies, everything looked in place.
‘Yes’ Annabel said to Flute Stick. ‘But I've never used my powers like this before. It feels…strange…. good even. I didn’t know I was capable of such things.’
‘In years to come’ Shawn shot her a sideways glance, ‘your powers could become even stronger.’
‘With practice’ she smiled at him.
‘Come on’ Shawn said to them. ‘We should look around.’

The last few remaining guards were quickly dealt with by the freed prisoners, and Shawn, Annabel and Flute Stick were free to wander as they pleased.
The whole place, with the exception of where the guards ate and slept, were miserable places to be, all lacking sunlight. But the last place they came to was the worst of all. The living quarters of the guards master.
Inside the room was spacious and beautifully decorated. But the image was destroyed by the bodies of women that were scattered around the room. Some partially dressed, some completely naked. One rested on her knees upon a table, her arms above her head, she was held up by her wrists by chains that hung from the ceiling. Protruding from her body were several crossbow bolts.
Another was tied to the bed by her wrists and ankles. It was unclear at a glance how she had died.
And three were sitting in a wooden bath, the water now cold, with slit throats and wrists. The water was red.
‘Gods…’ Shawn whispered, covering his nose and mouth.
‘I've seen worse’ Flute Stick commented offhandedly behind him.
‘Maybe you should be somewhere else’ Shawn quickly said to Annabel.
‘I'm not a child’ she snapped angrily at him. She approached the kneeling woman on the table, staring at her closely. ‘It’s…’ she began.
‘Thinking the same thing as I am?’ Flute Stick asked coming to stand beside her. ‘All the bolts avoid vital organs. This poor girl was made to suffer, for a while by the look of it.’
‘We should bury them’ Shawn told them.
‘You're probably right’ Annabel turned her back on the kneeling woman. ‘This must have been so horrible for them.’
‘It’s alright’ Flute Stick said untying the naked woman on the bed. ‘They are at peace now.’
‘I wasn’t expecting this’ Annabel said.
‘I have learnt through my years’ Flute Stick said lifting the dead woman in his arms, ‘that the most evil people hide amongst us, and do so well. They could be your neighbour, that person down the road who sells you bread, even your own children.’

Annabel scratched her sweaty palms without realising she was doing it.
'Are you going to help?' Flute Stick asked her, as Shawn behind her lifted one of the women from the red bath.
'I think they would be too heavy for me to carry……' as she spoke this, she seemed to hesitate at her own words.
'Fine' Flute Stick told her. 'That's fine. Just get the door for me at least.'

As they made their way back to the garden to bury the women, they found by that time all of the prisoners had been freed. There were hundreds of them, they crammed the tiny space in the garden, at the doorways around the edges and at the windows above them, all looking down at the centre where stood a man. Adam was his name. He was one of the men they had found some months ago who had, along with many others they had gathered in that time, agreed to join them in their cause to fight against the king. He had done so because of some punishment he had suffered on the king's orders, despite his previous years of service, despite the fact he claimed innocence. That is why he turned against the king now.
He gave a speech to the prisoners around him, standing on a chair that had been brought out for him; he was elevated above the others, speaking out of what they did today and why, and what they wanted in return. His speech was interrupted however by a cry from one of the men in the balcony above them. The man ran to the lower level and pushed his way through the others to reach Shawn who carried the dead woman from the bath. Sobbing hysterically and holding her face, the man wailed in despair, cursing the gods, cursing all men and cursing himself.
Annabel nearby did not watch, instead ordered the other men around to keep back and keep their distance. They obeyed.
The man was calmed, the women were buried; all of them, and Adam continued explaining their situation to listening ears, finishing by telling all the men, that those who wished to leave, could do so of their own free will. Many were listed criminals, and if they stayed in their homeland would be recaptured and punished for sure, but were free to leave if they wished. By the end of the day, only about half the men freed from their cells had chosen to stay. The other half had wandered and dissipated, never to be seen again.
'Well' Carrot said, flicking back his red hair as he counted the men that had remained. 'It could have been better.'
'It could have been worse' Flute Stick added.
The prison was abandoned, and the long journey to the coast on foot began. When they reached the ship that was waiting for them at the harbour, they found there was not enough space on the ship for all the men.
'I will stay here' Adam offered. 'I will find another ship and follow you with the others when I can.'
'Are you going to be alright?' Shawn asked him.
'I'll manage' Adam replied drying. 'Don't worry about me.'
He grasped Shawn by the wrist, patting his shoulder roughly.
'Now go. Take who you can and get out of these dreadful lands and I will do the same.'
'I'll see you at home' Shawn nodded, 'when we reach our own soil.'
'I will count down the days' Adam said letting go of him. 'Now get a move on.'

Shawn, Flute Stick, Carrot, Annabel and all those they could fit on their waiting boat, boarded and set sail.
Shawn watched from the rear of the ship as Adam's profile grew smaller and smaller the greater distance grew between them. Eventually he grew tired, and descended into the belly of the ship to get what rest he could in this rocking world.
He was woken sometime later, by the sound of a violin playing. It was night time by then, and when he entered onto the deck of the ship, he saw the sky above him was blue and the clouds dark. The wind was faint, and the only sound besides the melody that had woken him, was the sound of the canvas sails waving in the breeze as they hung from the spar above him.
The tune that came to him now was a heart-wrenchingly sad melody, but at the same time it was beautiful. The high-pitched notes played eerily on the night, and as Shawn approached the source of the music, he saw Annabel, sitting against the foremast, the blue light of the night's sky shining down upon her. For a moment, it took his breath away.

Annabel lowered her violin when she had finished, lifting her head towards Shawn. He went to sit next to her, glancing down at the instrument in her hands. It had been a gift he had bought for her some months ago, ever since he had heard her play for the first time before the gypsies, he had wanted to buy one for her.
'That was beautiful' he said.
She smiled silently at him, running her fingers over the smooth shining wood. It was not a standard violin she owned, Shawn had chosen it because of its unusual colour. It was painted a deep and beautiful blue.
'That was a close call for you earlier in the prison. I hope you weren't too scared by it all.'
'I will manage.' Annabel faced him properly. 'We knew it would work though didn't we? We knew he had a weak spot for women, we spent a long time after all gathering information before attempting what we did.'
'Even so, I fear it could have gone much worse. For all the information we collected and we didn't know…. well….' he broke off. 'That is best forgotten about.'
'Those women…' Annabel began, '…no' she finished. 'There is nothing I can say to soften it. They all suffered horribly and probably didn't deserve it.' She lifted her violin as if intending to begin playing again. 'They were probably all good people' she mumbled then pausing. 'Some might even have had children.'
'You've changed you know' Shawn said to her, 'since I first met you.'
'As have you.'
'You've changed more.'
'Well. I was never a soldier like you were. I hardly left my village. Seeing the world…. I've always wanted it, but never imagined it would be quite like this. Some parts yes have been horrible, but…. I feel I have learnt so much since I left my home. I don't necessarily regret leaving, though the circumstances…' she bit her lip. 'I wish I could have said goodbye to my parents.'
She lowered her violin again, casting her eyes out towards the sea.
'When was the last time you saw your family?' Annabel said to him.
'It's been over ten months now. Why do you ask?'

‘Do you think I could see my own family soon?’
‘I don’t think that would be a very good idea. I think it would still be too dangerous, with everything that’s been happening. You might put them in harm’s way.’
‘Is that why you haven’t seen your own family for so long?’
‘No’ Shawn spoke slowly. ‘I've just…. never gone back there…I haven’t had the opportunity to see them.’
‘Do you think they’re worried about you?’
‘Probably’ he shrugged. ‘I'm sorry, but you can’t see your own family because of what you are. The king is hunting down Weather Makers, and if you try to make contact with them, especially now…’ he broke off. ‘You wouldn’t want them to suffer for it.’
‘Perhaps you're right’ Annabel sighed. ‘I just miss them so much.’
‘I know’ Shawn nodded. ‘I miss my own family too.’
She leant back. ‘I often wonder what they’re doing. At this very moment…’ Annabel thought aloud, ‘in the evenings my mother likes to stitch. My father likes to read. He has many books; he can’t get enough of them. I never picked up that trait from him myself. I had other interests.’ Annabel fell silent for a moment. ‘Come to think of it, I am not much like my parents at all.’
‘We are not always like our parents.’
‘Are you like your parents?’
‘I…’ Shawn began. ‘I am more like my father was.’
‘What was he like?’
‘He was…brave’ Shawn nodded. ‘A good man. Kind……and a good father. I miss him terribly.’
Annabel smiled sadly at him.
‘It would have been nice to have known him’ she began. ‘I think…’
But she was suddenly cut off then by the sound of a scream of terror coming from the lower deck. Annabel and Shawn both instantly tensed.
Shawn rose to his feet and ran towards the source of the noise, behind him Annabel stood, but remained where she was, holding the neck of her violin with both hands anxiously.
Within the ships sleeping quarters, Shawn found Carrot screaming and thrashing around in panic in his hammock.
‘No please not again! Get away from me!’
‘CAM!’ Flute Stick was shouting as he shook him. ‘Cam! It’s alright you're safe!’
Carrot fell back in his hammock gasping and shaking violently.
‘Oh god…. thank god…’ he placed a hand over his face. ‘It seemed so real….’
‘I know’ Flute Stick comforted, his voice gentler now. ‘We’re safe, we’re both safe. Just…try to get back to sleep.’
Carrot rolled over on his side, taking a deep and steady breath; then falling still. Flute Stick looked exhausted, but instead of going to his own hammock to sleep, sat beside Carrot in a chair close by.
Shawn watched this curiously. Behind him the others they had rescued from the prison, the soldiers, mercenaries and slaves and innocents, were stepping out from their rooms to see what the commotion was about. No doubt it had been alarming for them to hear.
‘Ere, what's all the noise?’ one called.

‘Go back the sleep’ Shawn commanded him. ‘All of you. Everything here is fine.’
They slowly began to disperse again, slipping back behind the doors they had come from. Everything fell silent and still once more.
‘I'm sorry’ Flute Stick said to Shawn as he entered the room. ‘He cannot help it.’
‘I know’ Shawn nodded.
He took an empty seat beside Flute Stick, glancing over towards him.
‘I can’t help but notice’ Shawn said breaking the silence, ‘that the two of you always take turns in sleeping.’ He waited. ‘You never both sleep at the same time.’
Flute Stick looked mournful as he watched the still profile of Carrot. He did not face Shawn.
‘What happened to the both of you to make you wake so frightened all the time?’ Shawn asked.
‘Oh Shawn’ Flute Stick sighed. ‘It was horrible.’ He glanced towards him at last. ‘But its best you didn’t know.’

Chapter Thirty-Five
New Dreams

The journey across the seas took several days, but when at last the watchman above them in the crow’s nest called that land had been sighted, there were cheers all around.
Shawn stood beside Annabel on the deck as the harbour drew closer to them. They exchanged excited glances, before looking back towards the land.
When their ship drew up gently against the harbour and was docked, Shawn was one of the first to walk down the gang plank and step upon solid land once more.
‘Gods does it feel good to be standing on home soil again.’
‘You're telling me’ Annabel threw her hands up in the air, spinning once as she walked forwards, the hem of her dress twirling around as she went.
She stopped suddenly before Shawn, drawing closer to him, their faces inches apart. Annabel smiled seductively before speaking.
‘I need a bath’ she said.
Shawn threw his head back and laughed out loud.
‘I hear that’ he said. ‘I might just join you.’
‘Don’t be silly’ Annabel slapped his shoulders. ‘There wouldn’t be enough room for both of us in the same bath.’
‘God will you two stop flirting’ Carrot moaned at them at he floated past. ‘I'm getting sick of listening to it.’
‘We have to settle the new men in their place’ Flute Stick added appearing beside them. ‘Don’t forget why we’re here.’
‘I know’ Annabel waved them away. She considered Shawn for a moment, giving him a scrutinising look, hands placed upon her hip. ‘We settle the soldiers’ she said, ‘*then* the bath.’
He smirked at her.

‘Fine’ he said.
They led the collection of men through the harbour, the sailors, fishermen and other common folk watched the strange band saunter by with casual disinterest before getting back to their business. The sight of these men and soldiers had become familiar to them, and they cared little for them in their minds anymore.
Just outside the harbour, was a camp, where a portion of the men they had gathered in the few months that had gone by now stayed. Tents were lined up in a small area, where bored and tired figures milled around without purpose.
It took several hours for the new men to be organised amongst those already there. Each had to be found a place amongst the others, a tent of their own and food.
‘This is your new home’ Annabel announced to them. ‘You will be staying here for a while until you receive further orders.’
‘I like my old home better’ one man instantly replied while another protested about taking orders from a woman.
It took a long while to settle them down as they began to scuffle and fight amongst themselves.
When they were finished, one of the men asked Flute Stick, ‘when do we get our horses?’
Flute Stick shot the man a comical expression, which turned into a glare.
‘You don’t get your own horses’ he replied shortly. ‘Who do you think we are?’
‘Oh.’ The man said. ‘I was sure we would get our own horses.’ He shuffled off, grumbling under his breath.
‘Well’ Shawn huffed loudly and deliberately. ‘Since we’re done here, I think I’ll go and do other things.’
‘Me too’ Carrot added, his accent strong. ‘I'm going for a drink, if any of you would like to join me?’
‘We should go see Farrell’ Shawn suggested. ‘Just to see if he’s ok.’
‘I'm sure he’s fine’ Flute Stick replied carelessly. ‘You two go check on him. Carrot and I are kicking back. Have fun. Bye!’
Carrot and Flute Stick wandered off in one direction, and Shawn and Annabel went the other.
When they reached the house of healing situated at the end of the harbour, they entered the building.
Farrell’s expression broke into a wide smile at the sight of them.
‘Oh at last!’ he declared. ‘Human company! I’ve been so bored stuck here. Oh…and how was your trip? I hope everything went ok. You got everything done that you wanted didn’t you? I hope it all went smoothly.’
‘It went well enough’ Shawn nodded to him, pulling up a chair beside Farrell’s bed. ‘We got the men we needed. Adam will arrive sometime later with the rest, when he finds another ship.’
Farrell nodded eagerly at that. ‘Hey Annabel, it’s good to see you.’
‘It’s good to see you too’ she replied. She had pulled up her own chair beside Shawn’s. ‘I’m glad to see you in good health. I prayed for your wellbeing.’
‘Did you also sacrifice a goat?’ Farrell asked sarcastically after laughing at her for several seconds. ‘You know I don’t buy into that nonsense.’
‘Stop that’ Shawn glared.

‘When will you be able to leave?’ Annabel continued.
‘I would leave now if I could. But you know what the healers are like…’
‘I hope you're listening to them’ Shawn said sternly.
‘Yes….’
‘You nearly died. I *do* hope you are listening to them’ Shawn repeated.
‘Yes….’
‘Hmm.’ Shawn turned away.
‘So what was it like?’ Farrell asked Annabel. ‘You're first journey across the sea?’
‘Well…it was exciting to say the least. I would very much like to revisit the place, when our circumstances are a lot different.’ She touched her own face briefly, where the bruises and cuts were still healing. ‘Have you ever had to go there yourself?’ she asked Farrell.
‘Sometimes’ Farrell shrugged, ‘once or twice a long time ago, when I was a soldier in the kings army.’
‘Shawn and I agreed that we would visit the place together again one day. They have the most beautiful mountains and lakes there, and strange silver fish that glisten like jewels.’
They talked like this for some time until Shawn asked Farrell the whereabouts of Tristan.
‘I don’t know. He hasn’t returned since you left. Barrel and Woodworm have returned already though…they’ve brought some more men…’
‘Where’s Arlen?’
‘Don’t know’ Farrell replied to Shawn. ‘Barrel and Woodworm might know. They're fishing by the rocks.’
Shawn and Annabel met Barrel and Woodworm a short time later and asked them about Arlen.
‘Don’t know’ Barrel laughed at them, staring down at his open palm as a crab scuttled across it, the sunlight shining off the scar that covered one side of his face. ‘Woodworm, do you know?’
‘He’s on the beach over there’ Woodworm indicated without looking. ‘He’s been acting so strange lately’ he said, casting his lure out again. ‘He just stands there alone talking to himself. I think he might have gone mad.’
Shawn and Annabel went to find him.
‘I'm surprised to find them together’ Annabel commented. ‘I always thought that Barrel got on Woodworm’s nerves so much.’
‘Who knows’ Shawn shrugged, ‘I'm sure there is a lot about both of them we don’t know, and the others too for that matter. Maybe they’ve known each other for a long time.’
When they had found Arlen, it was indeed as Woodworm had described. He stood there, a figure out of place in the middle of the beach, just staring out towards the sea.
Shawn came up behind him.
‘Arlen?’ he said tentatively. ‘Are you ok?’
‘I'm getting old now’ Arlen was saying in a far-off voice. ‘My life is half over…. I’m fifty years old…. half a century…...so old……...Ramana would have been thirty-eight by now…. but Amaia is still young…maybe I will die of old age before I find her…. maybe I will be killed before that…’
The two of them left him alone, deciding silently between them that perhaps it was best. They returned to the inn where they had a room each waiting for them.

As they ascended the stairs, heading to the rooms above, Carrot called out to them.
‘Hey! You over there! Yes you! How about a drink?’
‘Not now’ Shawn groaned. ‘I'm tired.’
‘Oh come on’ Annabel encouraged. ‘Why don’t we have some fun?’
‘You go’ Shawn said to her in a quiet voice. ‘I…I think I need some rest.’
‘You're worried about Farrell and Arlen aren’t you?’
‘I just…. think I need to be alone for a moment. I've been surrounded by nothing but sweaty men for the last few weeks…’
‘And one sweaty woman’ Annabel smirked.
‘You stay and drink’ he said to her.
‘Fine. If you're sure. Goodnight Shawn.’
The men below them began to cheer as Annabel made her way back down the stairs.
‘Pull up a chair for the lady!’ Flute Stick hollered. ‘Let’s have a drinking game, and see who passes out first!’
Annabel sauntered towards the bar and tucked her skirt behind her to sit as one man pulled back a chair for her at the table. She reached for the tankard that Carrot slid across the table at her, and began to drink with the rest. And then they began to sing.

Over mountains and over road
Through caves and trees and hills and snows
There lies an inn all worn and old
Crumbling in the icy cold

We’ll patch her up and add some paint
One small job this surely aint
Men and women now all as one
A poet in search of a good story
And passers by now just for fun
Returned the old to all its glory

A big bright fire, a burning pyre
Left outside the scare the ghouls
Whilst inside the strumpets sing
And dancers with bells they ring
Sing and clap and laugh out loud
The noise from far it draws a crowd…

Shawn reached his room and closed the door, muffling the noise from downstairs. He thought for a moment of how scared Annabel had been when they had first met her, how uncertain she had been in their presence days after that, and how comfortable she felt with the soldiers now. It was as if she had grown up with them, like Shawn had, as if they were all part of the same family. He thought of how much she had changed in the short time he had known her, and wondered if he had changed also.

I wonder if my mother and sister would recognise me when I finally return.
He slouched over to the bed, and fell back upon it, falling asleep in minutes.
He was woken sometime later when Annabel came to his room. She shook him gently awake and he sat up, seeing her there now wearing her nightdress. She carried a small lantern in one hand, and a cup of steaming liquid in the other.
'Hey' she whispered quietly to him. 'I hope I'm not disturbing you.'
Shawn smiled. 'You could never disturb me' he whispered back. 'I'm surprised you….'
'What?'
'Well I thought you'd be…. you know…...a little drunk?'
'I am not as irresponsible as some of the men' Annabel replied quietly, 'and besides, I'm used to the stuff.' The inn now was utterly silent, and the hour was very late. 'I brought you something to drink' Annabel said.
'Alcohol?'
'No. It's just a sweet drink.'
Annabel handed him the cup and Shawn sipped it, tasting the hot liquid, it was flavoured sweet honey and lemon.
'It's nice' he said.
'My mother used to give it to me before bed' Annabel explained. 'She used to say it would help me sleep. But I don't think it ever did.'
'So why are you giving it to me now?'
Annabel shrugged. 'Just an excuse to see you I suppose.' She smiled. 'I just wanted to see if you were ok.'
'I'm fine.'
'Good. Then I will see you in the morning.'
She headed back to the door, turning back and winking at him before slipping through and closing it after her.
Shawn finished the rest of his drink, and went back to sleep.

In the house of healing, Farrell slept.
His mind had become uneasy since his injury; no longer did he have the dreams of the figure in the woods, the one that might have been his daughter.
No longer did he constantly hear the words, *find me*.
Now he dreamt of something else.

Farrell walked through familiar rooms, places he had spent so many years in. It was his old home. Not run down and empty as he had come to know it, but as it used to be. Back in the day.
But something was different. There were so many vases and jars about the rooms that held a dazzling array of brightly coloured flowers. Flowers of every kind that Farrell knew of, and some that he didn't, they filled his entire house. He then heard singing coming from the next room, a beautiful angelic voice, sung in a high-pitched melody.
Farrell moved slowly to the next room, towards the voice.

He saw Ramana.
She was gliding about the room as she sang, placing more flowers she held in a bundle, into waiting jars already filled with water.
'They are beautiful' she said back to him as she continued. 'Aren't they?'
He came up behind her and took her hand, pulling her gently around so that she turned to face him.
'What are you doing here?' he said. 'You're supposed to be dead.'
Her expression did not change. She drew slowly back, still holding the remaining flowers, her hand slipped from his grasp.
She walked past him, and vanished.
Farrell looked around.
Ramana was gone, along with all the flowers.

Farrell woke. It was still dark in the room around him. It was still dark through the window outside.
He lay there in silence, wondering what time it was.
He lay there in silence, waiting to go back to sleep.
Farrell woke again sometime later, seeing the early morning rays of the rising sun shining faintly through the single window in his room. He heard the gulls cry outside as they soared through the sky and over the sea, and even indoors from where he lay; he could smell the salt in the air.
Farrell heaved himself out of bed and made his way gingerly towards the window. Though it was early, figures were already milling about outside, and he could see the fishermen readying their boats docked at the harbour, preparing to sail away out to the open sea.
Farrell watched the outside world for a long while, recognising two figures that passed his window, walking side by side across the harbour. They were the figures of Shawn and Annabel, walking together close to one another.
He felt a lonely pang in his heart then, thinking of how much he missed Ramana, how much her absence had affected so many. Like a void in his soul that could never be filled again.
He forced himself to turn away from the window. Suddenly he spotted on the mantelpiece near him a miniature statue of the god Filis, the young boy with his six wings and long horns.
Farrell sneered at it, moving back to the bed and lying down again, feeling bored out of his mind. He waited for sleep to come again. Just to pass the time. He would be waiting for several hours. But when he did finally manage to sleep again, he began to dream.

The house had fallen quickly silent; there was not a sound to be heard. Farrell listened carefully, noticing more of the candles being blown out as Ramana crept through the manor, teasing him. Before long, the only light that existed, was that given by the moon, pure white against the dark sky above, frozen in the air in its celestial beauty.
Farrell stepped slowly across the hall, moving carefully to avoid bumping into something. He moved into the next room, taking in what little he could see. Dark shapes, and outline of the furniture.

He looked around him; utter silence was all he experienced now. He saw no movement. Farrell spoke, but it felt like he was addressing the very darkness himself.
'Ramana?'
His voice, though he spoke it softly, sounded loud in the still world around him.
'Where are you?' he whispered now, as if speaking to himself.
He felt a touch from behind him, arms reaching gently around him, holding him tenderly. Ramana rested her cheek against his back, sighing deeply, content.
Farrell lowered his head, smiling. He lifted his hands to Ramana's arms that held him, holding her to him.
'I love you' she whispered from behind him.
'I love you too' Farrell responded.
He heard her sigh happily again.
She let go of him, and he turned, but she was gone.
The next he saw her; she was waiting on the stairs. Noticing that he had spotted her, she skipped away, heading up the stairs towards their bedroom.
He followed her, stepping carefully through the darkness and up the stairs. He reached the open door to their bedroom. Two hands reached out of the shadows and grabbed him, pulling him into the room.
Farrell bent forward and kissed his wife, the two wrapped up in each other's arms. Farrell felt something strange, like an electrical current running through his body as he touched her. The hairs on his body were standing on end as they caressed one another.
He pushed her back into the room, further and further until the back of her legs touched the end of the bed. She slowly fell back onto the bed, inviting him towards her. Ramana reached her bare foot out to him, running it down Farrell's chest. Through the closed window, the full moon shone, and Farrell could see his wife lying back on the bed. Her long beautiful black hair thrown back and her arms above her head as she watched Farrell expectantly. The clouds gliding across the sky outside concealed the moon once again. The bedroom fell into shadow, and Ramana's outline as she lay on the bed, became concealed.
The room became suddenly cold. Farrell heard Ramana shifting on the bed before him, perhaps moving away to give him space to enter. Farrell moved onto the bed, reaching Ramana who had crawled toward the headboard. Bearing over her, Farrell felt a cold draft on the back of his neck, though the window was closed.
He lifted the skirt of her dress up, running his hand up her thigh. Ramana shivered, her breath shuddering.
The room felt cold, felt icy.
Ramana grabbed his shirt roughly, ripping it apart and tearing the buttons away, running her claws down his chest.

Farrell woke abruptly, startling the healer that stood over him.
'Oh sir' she gasped. 'You gave me such a fright.'
'What are you doing?' Farrell snapped at her, heart racing.
'I'm just checking on your injuries' the lady replied evenly. 'And I think I might give you something to help you sleep' she added, 'you are ever so restless.'

Farrell didn't answer as he lay his head back down. He stayed there silent and still, as the healer carefully pulled back the bandages that covered his chest to check on the burns beneath. It was a nasty injury, and the scars were likely to remain grotesque for the rest of his life.
The healer worked quickly and replaced the burns with fresh bandages. She gave him two drinks, one to help him sleep and another to ease the pain. Then she left. Farrell shifted uncomfortably, propped on several pillows with his arm in a sling. The lump on his collar bone still had not gone down yet.
He took a deep breath, and was asleep shortly after, the drug quickly taking effect.

'I like the feeling of the water between my toes' Annabel was saying as she splashed her feet in the sea.
'Do you like the feeling of fish nibbling your feet?' Shawn asked.
'That would tickle a lot I imagine' she replied.
They sat now at one of the smaller harbours built closer to the water. Beside them small boats rocked in the water, which was cool and refreshing. They were alone here at this time, and had the place all to themselves.
'I love the fish here' Annabel said kicking up the sand beneath her and watching through the clear water as the fish quickly gathered to eat what they could find. 'They're all so tame.'
'A lot of people swim here I suppose.'
'You know what I love more than fish?'
'What?'
'Starfish.' She beamed at him. 'Do you like starfish?'
'They're ok I suppose.'
'You don't like them?'
Shawn shrugged at her. 'It's just a fish.'
Annabel tutted, rolling her eyes at him. 'That's such a man answer. I think they're so pretty. Like sea horses, they're so unusual. It's almost as if they're from a different world.' She winked at Shawn. 'Don't you think?'
'Maybe' he replied shortly.
'You're so funny.'
'I don't mean to be.'
'That's what makes you so funny.'
Shawn shook his head at her, frowning.
'Why don't we go for a swim?' she suggested.
'Now?'
'Yes.'
'I thought you didn't like the water that much' he said to her.
'Some days…when the water's not too cold…well…' she went on with a sly grin. 'The truth is I want to see *you* swim.'
'Oh?'
'Come on' she said eagerly rising to her feet. She pulled her dress over her head, leaving only her white under dress on, before moving forwards and sliding into the water.

‘Come in’ she called back to him. ‘It’s lovely and refreshing.’
‘It’s not too cold for you I hope.’
‘It’s just about right’ she answered. ‘It’s lovely and cool.’
Shawn took his boots off, standing and pulling his shirt over his head.
Annabel watched him closely, taking in his muscular chest and lean frame as he slipped off the harbour and made his way through the water towards her. She purred to herself as he came within reaching distance, lifting her eyes up to him, while his eyes travelled down.
‘Come on’ she said, pushing herself back into deeper waters and swimming away.
He followed after her.
‘Where did you learn to swim?’ he asked.
‘There is a small lake near where I used to live. My brother and I used to go there a lot when we were young. We used to play games in the water, like tag, and hide and seek…...he would always win.’
‘Sounds like fun’ Shawn raised an eyebrow mischievously.
‘No’ Annabel sang back. ‘You would only win.’
‘All the more reason to play’ he said moving closer to her.
She swam away from him, enticing him to follow.
‘Let’s see how far we can swim out.’
They ventured into deeper waters, diving down to see what was below. Shawn took her hand as they swam together below the surface, pointing out to her a shoal of jet-black fish with pointed tails that darted past. She smiled to him, and nodded back. They dived several times, coming back up for air after seconds. When Annabel began to grow tired, Shawn let go of her hand.
‘Stay here for a moment’ he said to her. ‘I've just found something.’
She waited for him as he dived down once again, surfacing a short time later some distance away.
‘Ana!’ he called to her, and she swam over to him.
When she had reached him, he held his hand out to show her something he had found.
Sitting on his palm, was a little starfish.

‘What are you going to do when all this is over?’ Annabel asked him when they had left the water.
Her skin had become wrinkled she had spent so long in the water, as had Shawn’s. They both sat now in the sun to warm up after swimming for so long in the cool water, still wearing the damp clothes they swam in. They were seated upon the harbour again.
‘Don’t know’ Shawn shrugged. ‘I never really thought much about it. Ever since I was young, I've always wanted to be a soldier like my father. I suppose that’s sort of what I'm doing now.’ His eyes grew distant then as he thought of Brice. ‘He was a good soldier’ Shawn continued, ‘my father. When I was young…seeing him in all his armour, mounted upon his war horse…...it was so incredible. I remember thinking…that I wanted to be like that someday.’
‘I'm sure it was very exciting for a little one’ she agreed. ‘I never saw such things.’
‘Well my father and both of his brothers…Farrell and Arlen…they were all soldiers….so….’ he shrugged again. ‘I suppose I was inevitable that I wanted to be the same.’

‘He died in battle, didn’t he?’ Annabel asked him, speaking to the water before her.
‘Yes’ Shawn answered quietly.
‘Do you worry……. that the same might happen to you?’
‘Well…we all die in the end. And it’s just the path I've chosen.’
‘But…’ Annabel went on, worry creeping into her voice. ‘What if you die?’
‘What if *you* die?’ Shawn countered turning to face her.
They stared at each other for a moment, before each looked away.
‘What did your father look like?’ Annabel asked after a time.
‘You know I…’ Shawn lowered his head, ‘I don’t remember…’
They both stared out to sea. The water was still like glass, and there was not a breath of wind in the air.
‘What do we do now?’ Annabel asked after a time. ‘What happens from here?’
‘I suppose’ Shawn said raising his head, ‘we just wait for the prince to return.’
They sat together in silence. Above them the lazy clouds drifted overhead.

‘Farrell’ Ramana sang. ‘I made you a cake!’
Farrell stared at her with a flat expression, sitting upon the hillside that overlooked their little town.
‘It’s lemon’ she said presenting it. ‘Your favourite.’
She cut him a small piece and held the fork to his mouth. Farrell watched her, then leant forward to eat the slice.
‘It’s good’ he said.
‘I know’ she beamed. ‘The cakes I make are always nice. Do you know why?’
‘Why?’
She leant forward and whispered in his ear. ‘Because I make them.’
Farrell couldn’t help but smile as Ramana leant back.
She tried a piece of the cake herself.
‘It’s perfect’ she said.
Below them in the field grazed a black stallion, around him were many chestnut mares, some with foals, some of which were black. The day around them was picturesque.
‘I was going to make a chocolate one tomorrow’ Ramana said, staring down at the cake she held in her hands. ‘You like chocolate, don’t you?’
‘Yes.’
‘Not as much as lemon though.’
‘No.’
That sat in silence side by side, looking over at the town below them.
When Farrell next glanced beside him, Ramana was gone.

Farrell woke to hear a strange noise. He leant forward a little, trying to see out of the open door to his room. He heard the strange noise again, but this time he could identify it. It was the sound of footfalls. Someone was running.
Farrell placed his free hand on the side of the bed, pushing himself up with a groan. He swung his legs off the edge of the bed and rose to stand; thumping across the room he placed

a hand on the doorframe. He leant forwards and looked both ways down the corridor, spotting a young boy standing at one end. When the boy realised he had been seen, he slipped out of view.
Farrell cocked his head curiously, straightening; he made his way in the direction the boy had gone.
He reached the room at the end of the corridor, a larger room, where many patients stayed together in one place. All of them were asleep, but around the room scattering about, were several boys, varying between the ages of seven and sixteen.
As Farrell watched them, he noticed they were up to mischief. Some of the boys were swapping the patients medicines, some of them were tying the patients to various objects around the room, so that when they stood, they would take with them whatever they were tied to. Some were swapping their food and their clothes. The boy that Farrell had seen called out to the others in a harsh whisper.
'*Hey stop someone's seen us.'*
All the boys stopped what they were doing instantly; standing where they were and looking extremely guilty.
Farrell glanced about the room.
One of the boys approached him. 'What happened to you?'
'Yeah' another asked stepping forward. 'Why do you have that bandage on your chest? And why is your arm in a sling?'
'What's beneath the bandage?' another boy asked. 'Show us.'
Farrell looked from one face to the next as they watched him eagerly.
'Show us' another boy repeated moving closer. 'Why are you here? What happened to you?'
'I was…' Farrell began, '…in a fight.'
'Are you a soldier?'
'Yes, I am' Farrell said to the boy who had spoken.
The boys began to move closer to him, no longer guilty but curious.
'Show us what's beneath the bandage.'
Farrell lowered his head, using his free hand to carefully pull back the bandage on his chest, to reveal the burn and scarring.
'Cool' many of the boys said at once moving closer still. 'How did you get that?'
Farrell replaced the bandage, patting it back down carefully against his chest.
'I was fighting against another soldier' Farrell said, taking a seat beside the door.
'Was he big?' asked one of the boys.
'Was he scary?' asked another younger boy.
Farrell glanced towards the younger boy with a smile.
'He was the most terrifying man I have ever seen in my life, with glowing red eyes like a demon's, and great horns that grew out from his helmet, cruel and twisted they were. He wore a long cloak that was red like blood, and armour that was carved from human skulls. And by his side, he carried a massive hammer, wreathed in flame.'
'What does wreathed mean?' one of the younger boys asked.
'It means the hammer was made of flame' a boy said.
'It doesn't mean it was *made* of flame' another argued.

‘Anyway’ one of the elder boys interrupted loudly before an argument could break out. ‘What happened next?’ he asked Farrell. ‘Did you kill him?’
‘I did’ Farrell leant forwards, whispering dramatically. ‘But it was no easy task mind you. He was huge, a monster of a man. Eight feet tall at least and built like a mountain. One hit from his mighty weapon and I would have been dead! Squashed like an ant!’
The younger boy’s eyes grew like saucers as they tried to imagine such a thing.
‘There I was…’ Farrell spoke in a hushed tone, ‘facing this monster alone in the heat of battle. He had me in his sights, and I saw death in his eyes. If I had died that day by his hand, my soul would surely have spent the rest of eternity burning in a pit of fire. I knew that, but that did not faze me. I marched before him, raising my sword up high as he turned to face me….’
Farrell told the boys of great tales and stories of his past in battle, and the many victories he had won and battles he had fought throughout the better years of his life. He spoke for a long time until one of the healers came in to shoo them away, grumbling angrily at the games they had played on the patients earlier. The boys all scattered in different directions so that the healer could not catch them, quickly vanishing from sight like wisps of cloud on the wind. Soon enough, the room was as it was before, silent, as it should be.
‘Are you sure you are well enough to be walking around?’ the healer asked Farrell sternly.
He simply waved the man away without properly answering.
After that, he decided to sit outside the healers on a bench in the sun, sitting sullenly on his own and watching as others went about their business around him. Lost in his thoughts, he was far away.
Hours later he was visited by Annabel.
‘There you are. I couldn’t find you inside.’
Farrell blinked in surprise as he straightened up. He had been in a trance, just staring off into nothing.
‘Oh…what…?’
‘I have some bad news’ she told him seriously. ‘The prince has returned.’
‘Isn't that good news?’
‘He says the king knows about us and that he’s sending a small army here to kill us.’
‘Oh’ Farrell replied flatly.
‘And we can’t leave yet’ Annabel added, answering the question before Farrell had a chance to ask it. ‘Adam has yet to return with the other men we’ve gathered and we cannot leave without him. It would surely mean his death, and the death of all the men we’ve worked so hard to gather.’
‘So…’
‘We risk waiting for him’ Annabel concluded. ‘The king should be here in days…’

Moments earlier

The horse rode into the camp fast, followed by a host of men about thirty in number. The rider who led them called out to herald his arrival, his state in panic.
In no time at all many had gathered around him.

‘What's going on here?’ Shawn hollered as he strode forwards towards the disturbance. And then he saw the prince.
‘Tristan’ Shawn said in surprise. ‘You're back. What's wrong?’
Tristan wheeled his horse to face him, breathing heavily, pulling off his large brimmed hat and wig as he did so, and wiping off the make-up around his eyes. Because of who he was, when he set out to recruit men he always did so in disguise. Most would not spare him a second glance, dressed as he was in the bright travelling clothes of a gypsy.
‘We’re in danger’ Tristan gasped. ‘You have to listen to me.’
Behind Shawn, Annabel stepped to one side slowly to get a better look at one of the riders in the group behind Tristan. His eyes were white and he stared off into nothing. *Blind* Annabel thought.
‘The king…’ Tristan breathed. ‘My father…he knows about us…he’s sending men here to kill us all.’
‘Oh shit’ Woodworm spoke from the crowd.
Barrel began to cackle beside him.
‘Does he know about *you*’ Carrot asked the prince.
‘Thank the gods no. Not yet anyway…not to my knowledge...’ He spoke louder now, addressing the others. ‘We have to leave. It isn’t safe for us here.’
We can’t go yet’ Flute Stick told him.
‘Why not?’
‘We’re still waiting for Adam to return with the rest of the men we gathered across the water. If we go now…...we cannot leave him to his death…and the men…’
‘When are your father’s men supposed to get here?’ Shawn asked.
‘Two days maybe…three at most’ Tristan uttered, ‘but we could still leave.’
‘If the king finds the men we gathered here after we are gone’ Woodworm said, ‘then he will kill *all* of them. They are clearly foreigners and clearly prisoners. He wouldn’t want them here. Who would?’
‘But…’
The prisoners are clearly branded’ Shawn explained showing the naked flesh of his own forearm to the prince. ‘He would kill all of them and any associated with them. You should know that.’
Beside him Annabel had exposed her own forearm also. She and Shawn both shared the same mark, a burn in the skin. The twisted symbol branded them to all as prisoners and worthy only of a quick death if found out. Carrot and Flute Stick shared the same mark also.
‘It was not easy getting those men’ Shawn explained. ‘Sacrifices were made. If Annabel or I were to be seen with these marks we would be arrested and killed. We are putting our lives at risk to get these men…we cannot leave them now….’
Tristan looked as if he were about to say something, but the words seemed caught in his throat.
‘What will happen’ Carrot asked the prince, ‘if the king found you? Would he kill you?’
‘I don’t know’ Tristan shook his head. ‘I can’t be sure…’
‘We cannot go’ Shawn said firmly. ‘Too much is at stake here.’
‘We can stay for at least a day’ Annabel said lowering her arm. ‘Can’t we?’
‘I….’ Tristan began. ‘I have to think.’

He dismounted his horse and strode away, brushing his blonde hair back in frustration.
It was decided later that they would wait. In that time, Tristan could not settle.
He did not sleep, he did not rest, nor did he eat. He simply stood at the harbour, staring out to sea, willing for the ship to return. And when he was not staring out to sea, he was staring at the hills behind him, where his father's men would surely come from.

Chapter Thirty-Six
The Wait

'Get out you stupid bastard!'
Farrell stepped to the side to avoid the vase that was hurled at him.
'Ramana!' he bellowed back. 'Control yourself. This is *my* house!'
The response he received was a clock aimed at his head that came swiftly flying his way. Farrell ducked to avoid its path.
'Stop it!' he cried. 'I order you….'
This time he had to dodge a painting. Next Ramana headed towards a very expensive grandfather clock. Behind her within the room Farrell could hear the sound of a baby crying.
He only backed out of the room to avoid anything else he owned being broken. The instant he had stepped over the threshold of the doorway, the door was slammed shut in his face. Farrell heard seconds later, just behind the closed door, the sound of a very expensive grandfather clock crashing to the floor. She had blocked the door from the other side, locking herself in.
'I don't mean to intrude' spoke a servant meekly to him. 'But I think it's best if you leave her alone. She's snapping at us too.'
Farrell glared at the servant angrily, then at the closed door before him, as if it was the door's fault this had happened.
'You're probably right' he said through gritted teeth. 'Excuse me.'
Farrell turned on his heel and stormed out of the house, down the path and through the town, heading he knew not were. He only wished now to be as far away from this source of annoyance as possible.
'Hey Farrell!' came a voice.
Farrell hesitated, glancing about him. Then he spotted Brice.
'Are you alright brother?' Brice asked with concern. 'Did something happen?'
A short time later Farrell and Brice sat side by side on the edge of the town, facing out towards the horizon.
'What's it like to be a father?'
Brice hummed thoughtfully at his brother as he pondered the question. Now a proud father of two, his son Shawn was thirteen and his wife had given birth to a new baby girl, born a few months before Amaia. She had been named Gracie.
'It's hard.'
'Really?' Farrell droned humorously. 'I already knew at least that much.'

‘To be honest I've forgotten how hard it was’ Brice admitted. ‘I don’t remember Shawn being anywhere near as difficult as Gracie. I’m dreading her becoming a teenager.’
‘What should I do?’ Farrell groaned in frustration. ‘Ramana hasn’t allowed me into my own bedroom for days. She’s become somewhat hostile. The other day I swear I saw fire in her eyes.’
‘Well I don’t know about that’ Brice shook his head. ‘I wouldn’t worry too much.’
‘How could I not worry?’ Farrell asked. ‘She doesn’t want me around anymore.’
‘Just because she doesn’t want you around, doesn’t mean she doesn’t want *you*.’
‘I don’t understand.’
‘Women need their space’ Brice explained, ‘especially at a time like this.’
‘She’s practically thrown me out of my own home’ Farrell complained.
‘Be understanding’ Brice said to him. ‘Women are tricky creatures at times. They are very emotional, you have to understand them, and give them space when they demand it. Trust me, I know.’
‘You argue with Alice sometimes?’ Farrell asked him.
Brice scoffed. ‘All the time.’
‘But I thought wives were supposed to obey their husbands.’
Brice threw his head back at this, roaring with laugher.
‘Are you joking?’ he asked, wiping tears from his eyes. ‘Gods no. Woman rule over men. Most of us just don’t know it, because they do it with smiles, compliments and tantrums. We obey because we are either flattered, or because it’s easier to give in than to fight with them. Remember, you can never win an argument with a woman. They have an answer for everything and a quick tongue that will leave you speechless, with no answer to give.’
‘I never realised marriage would be so difficult’ Farrell sighed wearily. ‘I never thought having a family would be so hard.’
‘My dear brother’ Brice chuckled, patting Farrell’s shoulder heartily. ‘It’s only uphill from here.’
‘I know’ Farrell sighed miserably. He pursed his lips, lifting his eyes to the horizon.
The sun was setting before them, the town behind was falling evermore silent.
‘This was when life was good’ Farrell mumbled to himself. ‘Even the bad days.’
Beside him Brice said nothing.
‘Do you think things will turn out well in the end?’ Farrell asked his brother.
‘One can never tell’ Brice replied simply.
Farrell’s dreams began to falter then as his body stirred, but he fought hard to stay where he was.
He remained asleep, and in his mind, continued to exist in the best time and place in his life.
‘I'm sorry for what happened to you’ Farrell said suddenly to Brice. ‘I wish things could have been different.’
Beside him Brice did not respond.
‘I have to go’ Farrell told him. ‘I have to see Ramana before I wake.’
Farrell rose to his feet and strode briskly away and back home.
He ignored the servants who tried to speak to him, and headed straight upstairs to the bedroom.

The door was open now, and he saw Ramana asleep in a chair, the new-born baby held in her arms.
He approached them, stepping slowly so as not to wake either of them, even in his dreams.
He gazed down upon Ramana's sleeping profile. She was so beautiful, even with her long black hair unkempt and the bags under her eyes. The baby she held, their child, looked so tiny.
'You've got a lot of growing to do Amaia' Farrell told the baby softly, touching her head tenderly. 'My precious treasure.'
Tears came to his eyes as he spoke this, and he turned then towards Ramana who remained still.
Farrell leant forward, kissing his wife's forehead.

Farrell turned over, and woke gently.
He didn't know what had caused him to wake. There was no one else in the room with him, and all was quiet.
He rose from his bed, wandering over to the window, past the statue of the god Filis on the mantelpiece, and gazed outside.

Outside a blind soldier walked across the harbour, holding onto the arm of another soldier who led the way, the two of them walking slowly.
'I can smell the sea' the blind man said.
'Yes Alfie' the man who led him answered. 'We are by the sea. The waves are gentle, the sky is clear…' he looked around.
'Are we standing on a harbour?' Alfie asked.
'Yes, we are' the other man replied.
'The ground feels different. I can feel the wood beneath my boots as I walk' Alfie said.
'Yes Alfie' the other man replied.
Alfie blinded slowly, his milky white eyes shining.
'What else is there?' Alfie asked. 'Tell me what you see……I want to know.'
The other man glanced about him.
'There are children playing…' he began, 'men fishing off the coast, birds flying above them….and a ship on the horizon.' The man faltered at this. 'Could that be *the* ship?' he asked himself. 'Alfie' he said to his companion. 'We have to find the leader, the one who set us free. We're walking back now. Keep hold of my arm.'
Alfie obeyed as they moved away from the harbour, walking at a gentle pace.

A short time later, there was a crowd of men gathered at the harbour, waiting eagerly for the ship to dock. Tristan was among them, constantly glancing nervously about him.
At last the ship reached the harbour. Adam was the first to walk down the gangplank, stepping before the crowd and greeting Tristan and the others quickly.
'I'm glad things went well' Shawn told him as the men behind Adam gradually left the ship.
Adam nodded shortly. 'I'm sorry we weren't here sooner.'

He was about to speak again when a female figure from the ship pushed her way forwards through the crowd, coming to stand at the bottom of the gangplank and staring at Carrot who stood beside Tristan. She had tanned skin, wore gold armour and had long dark hair tied in a plait.
She stepped towards him slowly, eyes wide with shock and utter disbelief.
'Cam?' she whispered. 'Is that really you?'
'Tala?'

Chapter Thirty-Seven
Past Events

'Cam. I've got a bad feeling about this.'
'What would you have me do?' he argued back. 'Just leave?'
'Why not?'
'How could you suggest such a thing? You know what they do to deserters. Do you want to see me killed?'
'Of course not! But…'
'Tala' Cam said, lifting her chin carefully up. 'You're overreacting.'
'Cam please' Tala said. 'I've never felt this way before…there's something very wrong about this, I just know it.'
'It's just your mind playing tricks on you' he told her dismissively, moving through the kitchen of their home. 'There's nothing to worry about. I've done this a thousand times.'
'This time will be different' she said stubbornly following him.
'Why? Because you had a funny dream? Oh Tala' he shook his head
'Don't be so condescending' she snapped, giving him a shove. 'I mean it. Something isn't right.'
There came a knock on the door behind him, Cam glanced around to see his good friend standing there.
'I don't want to interrupt' Flynn said, 'but we've got to go now. They won't accept us being late.'
Cam turned back to Tala.
'Let's not fight now' he said to her. 'Please.'
She huffed at him, pursing her lips, but submitted to his words.
She uncrossed her arms, moving towards him and kissing him deeply. Cam held her tight, feeling the touch of her skin, smelling her perfume, hearing her breath.
'Wait for me' he told her.
'I will.'
'I love you Tala.'
'I love you too.'
He let her go, turning his back on her and striding towards his waiting friend, grabbing his sword by the door as he went. He left his home and mounted his horse tied up outside, the two of them rode away without looking back.
'I hope everything is alright' Flynn said to him as their horses rode at a trot.
'Of course it is' Cam replied confidently.
'What was she worrying about?'
'Oh' Cam shrugged. 'She said she's got a bad feeling about today.'
'Oh' Flynn replied. 'That's strange.'

‘Why?’
‘Because I had the same feeling as well…’

The two rode through the busy winding streets of their city. Trotting their horses past the merchants with their spices, calling out to potential buyers, and the Holy Ghosts dressed in deep gold that walked to the temples with their heads down and hands together. Above them a voice sang out to the city, letting everyone know that it was midday and time for prayers.
The clip clop of the horse’s hooves ceased as the two came to a halt, joining other members of their party.
The men were all gathered within minutes, and their General led them onwards to their destination.
‘Do you think we will be back by teatime?’ Flynn asked Cam as they rode side by side across the dried earth at the back of the procession.
‘Sure’ Cam replied. ‘This should be an easy one.’
‘A rebel camp?’
‘They won’t know we’re coming’ Cam said with confidence. ‘We have that advantage against them. And they’re disorganised and poorly equipped. This should be a breeze.’
‘I'm glad you think so.’
‘You're as bad as my wife’ Cam shook his head in amusement.
‘These orders came directly from the Red King’ Flynn reminded him. ‘He normally doesn’t get involved with this sort of affair, and especially with a small group of rebels……why do you think they’re so important?’
‘Enough of this’ Cam sighed wearily. ‘Don’t talk. Just ride.’
It was a few hours ride to their target, and when the band of about eighty men reached their destination, the attack began immediately.
When it was all over, Cam and Flynn and the other soldiers that had accompanied them, milled about in confusion.
‘Where are all the soldiers?’ Flynn asked loudly.
Cam glanced across the field of many tents. The only figures they had seen now were old men and young boys and women, many of which now lay dead.
Flynn pushed over a cooking pot as he walked by, turning on the spot and walking back.
‘Where are the enemy?’ he called to Cam.
Cam couldn’t answer, instead stood rigid in silence, and then they both heard crying. Their attention both moved towards the tent nearest them, and Cam approached. When he pulled back the sheet that covered the entrance, he saw two women there, surrounded by children. One woman was heavily pregnant, and the other held a tiny baby in her arms.
‘What is going on here’ Cam whispered in shock. ‘Where are all the rebels?!’ he shouted to the women huddled at the back of the tent.
They didn’t answer, merely sobbed in fear, squeezing their eyes tight shut, and hugging the children to them.
‘What is going on here?!’ Cam cried striding away from the tent, shouting to the air, speaking to everyone, and no one.
A short time later, an important official arrived on the scene, addressing all the soldiers.
‘You are all hereby under arrest, on the orders of the Red King.’
Cam and Flynn were thrown on their knees and shackled, as were all the soldiers around them, their General included.
‘NO!’ Cam cried out in panic. ‘There’s been a mistake!’

They were all transported in chains to the nearest prison, where they were then transferred to another prison.

They walked in a chained line through the open wire fence. Cam watched as their General moved to address one of the guards, pawing at his chest.
‘Please! There’s been a misunderstanding! We were ordered to do this!’
Another guard moved behind the General, plunging a knife downwards through his shoulder and shoving him aside, killing him in seconds.
‘Move along!’ the guard called to the other prisoners as he cleaned his blade. ‘And no stalling!’
Cam tore his eyes away from what he had just seen, his body beginning to shake in terror.
They all saw another terrible thing as they were led to their bunker.
A box that was too small for a person to fully sit in or stand or lie down in. There was a small hole in one side, where a face was staring through, a dead face. The face was gaunt and the eyes sunken. The body looked like it had been dead for several days.
In another box, could be heard chanting. The same words over and over again.
‘Kill me kill me kill me kill me…’
When they saw the face of the one who chanted, it was that of a boy of about sixteen.
The next few days when they spoke to other prisoners were even worse.
‘There are five hundred and six prisoners here’ one man said. ‘Nearly half the men here have been cleared to leave, but still remain. That man’ the prisoner that spoke pointed, ‘the one over there. He’s been here for eleven years and six months, despite no evidence for his supposed crime, and not even a trial. The one over there’ he pointed in another direction, ‘he’s been on a hunger strike for seven months.’
‘How come he isn’t dead?’ Cam asked.
‘He is being force fed’ the nameless prisoner answered.
‘Why is he on hunger strike?’
‘He is in protest’ the prisoner answered, ‘for his friend, who is being held in indefinite detention.’
‘Why are we here?’ Cam asked.
‘We are not being held for who we are, but for *their* idea of who we are.’

It was many days later, when Cam was shackled and hooded. He could not see. He could not hear.
He stayed this way for seventy-two hours, until he was released.
‘There is pain everywhere’ one prisoner told him afterwards. ‘I don’t want to die here.’
Some days later, the beatings began, sometimes in the middle of the night and without warning. And it was several days after that, that Cam was approached again by a guard, carrying a hood and shackles.
‘No please not again! Get away from me!’

Some days after that, Cam began his hunger strike.
He was force-fed by a tube through his nose. It was an agonizing thing to experience; sometimes the liquid would go to his lungs by accident.
‘Please….’ He whispered to the guard beside him one day as he lay tied down to the bed, ‘…just kill me….’

An unknown time after that, they were freed.
Soldiers from outside the prison swarmed the place one day, tearing down fences and freeing the prisoners. With them, came men and women dressed in deep gold robes. Holy Ghosts. Religious figures.

One of them took Cam by the hand, helping him to stand. He was emaciated now, far beyond even a shadow of his former self.
'It's alright' the Holy Ghost said to him with a kind smile. 'You are safe now.'
He walked with Cam, holding his arm out for Cam to hold, giving him support as they moved slowly. Free from his mask and shackles, Cam headed slowly to the outside world.
Beside him Flynn had also been freed from his own confinements. He lifted his head high, smiling at the sun.
'Fantastic' Flynn said, guided by another Holy Ghost. 'Lovely day…the sunlight…. unbelievable!'
'This place is beautiful' Cam said in a hoarse voice. 'I thought it was ugly before. Is that all the flowers….? I'm hearing the birds…seeing the clouds…. the green and the yellow…. the buttercups……I've seen nothing for so long.'
All of the prisoners were assessed after that, and given whatever medical care they needed.
'Why has this happened to us?' Cam groaned to the Holy Ghost, sitting before him at the table.
'Politics' the man replied simply. 'Our king has a lot to answer for. Now can you list as many words as possible that begin with the letter F?'
Cam stared at him.
'Umm……uuuuu…….' His head sagged. 'Finality.'
'Good' the Holy Ghost smiled encouragingly. 'Any more?'
'God no' Cam shook his head, tears streaming down his cheeks. 'I can't think….'

Chapter Thirty-Eight
Swift Decisions

They embraced one another, each holding the other so tight as if afraid to let go, as if letting go would lose the other again.
'Oh god' Tala sobbed, burying her face in his clothing. 'I prayed every day and every night for you to be returned to me.' She lifted her head up to his, tears streaming down her cheeks. 'I was told you were dead…' she said to him, 'but I didn't believe it.'
'Tala…'
'I tried to find you' she said her voice shaking. 'The king tried to silence me, tried to arrest me…. but things happened…'
'We were taken away to a camp' Cam told her. 'Flynn and I both.'
'Flynn?' she glanced behind Cam, spotting Flute Stick, who gave her a nod and a wave. 'You're alive too?'
'Adam' Tristan took a step towards him. 'We cannot linger. My father's men will be here very soon to attack us. We have to leave immediately.'
'Why haven't you already left?'
'We stayed to wait for you' Tristan explained. 'Shawn and Annabel were most insistent, but now we have to leave.'

The foreign prisoners were shepherded across the harbour, watched as usual by the bored looking sailors and fishermen.
'What's going on?' one prisoner asked. 'Where are you taking us?'
'Hush' Tristan snapped at him. 'Be quiet and you will find out.'
'I hope you're all up for some travelling' Adam hollered to them.
'Travelling?' one man echoed, a head, one of many, bobbing about behind them. 'What is this? A circus?'
'They lack discipline' Shawn noted.
'As to be expected' Tristan replied. 'Disobedient…disloyal…dishonest…it's all I ever expected of prisoners.'
'Do you think they will fight for us?' Annabel worried.
'They've come this far' Tristan said glancing back at her as they strode towards the camp, 'only because this unknown future we offer them is better than the certain death they faced in their homeland.'
'You think we will fail.'
Tristan slowed to a stop at Annabel's words, the gruff men surrounding them walked onwards.
'I cannot deny' he said, 'that the further down this path we go, the further I think we will fall. These men…' he lifted his head. 'They are no match for my father's soldiers, who are everything a soldier should be.'
'Then why have we come this far if you think we will fail?' Shawn spoke.
'Because I have to try' Tristan answered back. 'For Amaia….it doesn't matter how many of these men are lost…if there is a chance of reaching her, then I would take it.'
'Are you really her father?' Shawn asked flatly.
'Yes.'
'Not Farrell?'
'No.'
'I think you're lying' Annabel said.
'I don't care what you think' Tristan shot a glare at her. 'I know the truth.'

The group entered the camp, joining those already stationed there. The men were told of their orders and that it was time to leave. They began to bustle around in a disorganised manner, rolling up the tents and gathering their meagre possessions.
'Cam' Tala spoke firmly striding behind him. 'I want to talk to you.'
'About what?' he asked pausing.
'I don't want to do this.'
'Do what?'
'I cannot fight.'
'Then why did you come?'
'I did not think that I would ever see you again' she said. 'I thought things would be different.'
'But you answered the call of war.'
'Cam' she said taking his face in her hands. 'We have to leave this place together…. while we still can…. while we still have each other.'

‘What?’
‘I gave up hope on you Cam’ she said, biting her lips to stop them quivering. ‘I searched and searched for you…. for so long…. I gave up hope…. I thought you dead.’ As she spoke, tears spilled down her cheeks. ‘I spent my days fighting…like in the old days…it was all I had…. all that kept me going.’
Cam placed his hand upon hers, holding it tight as she spoke.
‘I didn’t know you’d be here’ she said in a whisper. ‘Let’s just leave…let’s go home.’
Cam stared back at her.
Then they both heard a call from one of the men nearby, a call that ran over the camp and sent everyone into confusion and panic.
‘Soldiers!’ came the cry. ‘Soldiers!’

Tristan lifted his head, his breath catching in his throat.
His heart stopped in his chest.
‘We’ve stayed too long’ he whispered.
All around them faces turned towards the hill, where there stood a line of men on horseback, their armour shining in the sunlight.
Panic ensued. The men in the camp scattered, trying to find their weapons. Tristan remained where he was unmoved, staring at his father’s soldiers upon the hill.
The soldiers rode them down, tearing through the camp, killing all in their path. The men on foot fought back as best they could, caught by surprise and unorganised, they stood little chance.
Tristan stood still where he was, standing tall and unflinching before the charging soldiers. None attacked him.
Tristan caught the eye of one of the men who rode towards him. The man turned in the saddle as he passed by, brow furrowed in confusion at the sight of Tristan.
Seconds later a horn sounded, blown by one of the men on horseback.
The cavalry began to retreat. They rode back towards the lip of hill, led by one figure that rode before the rest. Tristan watched as the men disappeared back over the hill. The camp around them fell into a hustle of shouts and sounds of the dying.
Tristan simply walked away.

The aftermath of the attack was that of confusion as men wandered about trying to find one another, and finding those that were dead.
‘Cam!’ a voice called above their heads. ‘Cam!’
‘I'm here’ he broke through the crowd, finding Tala again. ‘I'm safe.’
She embraced him, crying into his shoulder.
‘Oh thank god’ she breathed.

‘What was that all about?’ Woodworm demanded as he strode through the wreckage of their camp. ‘What just happened?’
‘I don’t know’ Adam replied. ‘They retreated so suddenly.’
‘We have to get out of here’ Flynn said stepping forward. ‘They’re sure to return soon.’
‘Where is Tristan?’ Woodworm called. ‘Where is he?’

A short time later, and they still remained at the camp.
‘Do you realise that this is near impossible for us to succeed’ Arlen spoke across the table in a raised voice. He and several others had gathered together to talk. Tristan still could not be found, and he was not amongst the dead. He had simply vanished, and there was no clear leader without him. ‘We were doomed from the start’ Arlen went on. ‘There is no way for us to get enough men without the king noticing. And even if we did, we don’t stand a chance against his army with this rabble of prisoners and veterans. Most are too old or too young…...we will all surely die.’
‘I thought you better than this’ Farrell shot back. He had been found amongst the injured, and bore several new wounds now to go alongside his old ones. ‘I thought you believed we had a chance.’
‘Now I see clearer.’
‘You're not giving up’ Farrell told him.
‘I didn’t say I was’ Arlen shouted back, fingernails digging into the table before him as he spoke.
‘We can’t stay here’ Adam spoke over the two before things could escalate. ‘We have to leave as soon as possible.’
‘They would catch us’ Arlen mumbled to himself, running his fingers through his hair.
Woodworm and Barrel and Flynn watched them argue silently as they stood around the table. Shawn and Annabel were there also. Cam was not, he was elsewhere.
‘We may not have to leave on foot’ Shawn spoke up. ‘There are still ships waiting at the harbour. That could be our means of escape. If we leave on foot….’ He shrugged. ‘Arlen is right. We have only very few horses; they would catch and kill us all for sure…. even a child could follow the footsteps of so many men, and Annabel….’ They glanced at each other. ‘She is not safe here’ Shawn finished.
‘We leave by sea then?’ Adam spoke up. ‘But even with the men we’ve lost, we could not transport them all away. There are not enough ships and not enough money.’
‘We’ve not enough money?’ Shawn repeated.
‘Tristan’s coin is swiftly running out’ Adam explained. ‘He is only the thirteenth son after all.’
‘Then what do we do?’ Flynn spoke up. ‘We cannot leave and we cannot stay.’
‘And we don’t have much time to discuss this either’ Shawn added. ‘They may return any minute now. We have to reach a decision.’
‘I could hold them off’ Annabel spoke up. ‘If I use my magic. I could give these men an opportunity to escape. By sea or on foot.’
‘But the king would know of your existence’ Shawn replied immediately. ‘We cannot risk it.’
‘I am not the frail girl I used to be’ Annabel snapped at him angrily. ‘I can fight and I can kill. And when I have to I will.’
‘Once he knows about you’ Shawn went on, ‘they will hunt you down.’
‘I'm not afraid.’
‘Well you should be.’
‘We don’t have a leader without Tristan’ Adam interrupted. ‘We have to reach a decision we all…. or at least mostly agree on.’

‘And be swift about it’ Woodworm added coolly glancing towards the hill. ‘Look’ he said, indicating the line of mounted soldiers that stood facing them on the lip of the hill. ‘They’re waiting to attack us again.’
The other straightened, all suddenly tense with fear.
‘What are they waiting for?’ Shawn asked nervously.
No one answered. All of them stared up in silence at the line of soldiers before them.

Over the lip of the hill just on the other side and out of sight, two men spoke.
‘Tristan’ the leading man said striding towards him. ‘What are you doing here?’
‘I was tracking a party of men here’ Tristan replied without missing a beat. ‘They intend to attack our father.’
‘Why?’
‘They don’t agree with his kidnapping of the Weather Makers.’
‘Why?’
‘I believe one of their daughters was taken.’
‘And they want to raise an army to find her?’ the man strode past. ‘My dear brother.’ He turned back to him. ‘Where have you been all this time?’
‘I told you already’ Tristan answered. ‘I was tracking them.’
‘For many months.’
‘Corvan’ Tristan sighed.
‘Don’t bother trying to feed me any excuses or half-truths or pure lies. It’s not my business what you do. I only fight to serve our father.’ Corvan paused. He smiled then, the edges of his lips tweaking. ‘It is good to see you again.’
‘Is it?’
‘I…. was beginning to worry.’
‘Were you?’
‘Why do you sound so surprised?’ Corvan asked.
Tristan turned away.
‘I even went to visit your wife. Even *she* didn’t know where you were…I thought…. for a moment…’
‘That I had died?’
Corvan tilted his head at Tristan, speaking to his back. ‘None of our brothers have heard from you in ages.’
‘I've been busy.’
Corvan sighed. You should return to father’ he suggested changing the subject. ‘He is worried about you I am sure.’
‘No’ Tristan shook his head. ‘He only worries about *her*.’
‘In any case, you should return, he’s been getting suspicious. It’s time you put his mind at ease.’
‘What will you do?’ Tristan asked him, finally facing him again.
‘I will stay here’ Corvan replied, ‘and finish off this lot, before they cause any trouble.’
Tristan bit his tongue, moving away before his brother could see the worry and uncertainty within him. He took a spare horse offered to him by one of the soldiers, a brown mare, and rode away from the scene, heading the long distance back to the palace alone, his father’s

home. All the while, thinking of those he was leaving behind, and wondering if any of them would make it.
But his father……he was not entirely sure what would happen when he met him. In the pit of his stomach, Tristan felt a flicker of worry as he feared for his life, once he placed himself before the king.
'We'll see' Tristan said to himself. 'We will see…'

'We'll split' Adam said at last to the others, leaning forwards on the table. 'Some of us go by ship across the sea. The rest of us go by land. We'll meet later in the mountains where the rest of our men wait.'
'Sounds good enough' Farrell said quickly. 'Now we have to move as soon as possible.'
The group of those surviving were split roughly in half, with one group heading towards the ships, the other remaining on land.

'We have to go back to our own land' Tala urged, speaking to Cam. 'I don't want to lose you again…not now I've just found you.'
'I will come' Cam nodded. 'Of course I will.'
'I won't' Flynn spoke up.
'What?' Cam glanced around in shock. 'But…we've always stuck together.'
'I'm sorry' Flynn uttered stepping back. 'I cannot return to that place…. after what they did to us…. how we suffered…'
'Flynn…' Cam moved towards him, letting go of Tala.
'No' Flynn replied beginning to shake. 'I cannot…. I cannot…too much…'
'Flynn' Cam said going to him, grasping his arm firmly. 'We are like brothers.'
'I cannot return' Flynn said again. 'I am afraid.'
'Then this is where we part' Cam said. 'Goodbye Flynn' he said embracing him. 'Maybe we will see one another again someday.'
'I hope so' Flynn breathed, holding him tightly back. 'I really hope so.'
Behind them Tala drew a sharp intake of breath.
The soldiers who had waited on the hill were charging again, the thunder of hooves from the beasts was growing louder as they advanced.

Adam called for the men to rally, but disorganised and poorly trained, this prisoners misfit of thieves and rapists and heathens were a poor match for the kings trained soldiers. They would be lucky to survive a second charge, and it was unlikely their attackers would retreat for a second time.
'Annabel you have to help us' Adam screamed, rounding on her. 'They'll kill us all!'
'No!' Shawn ordered charging forwards. 'You'll be put in danger!'
Annabel tensed, watching the charging wall of mounted soldiers draw ever closer by the second; listening to Shawn and Adam who stood either side of her.
'You've done it before' Adam shouted. 'You can do it again!'
Annabel saw the horses were nearly upon them, their riders a terrifying sight. Faces of men who were ready to kill. Faces of men who were not afraid to *be* killed.

Annabel took a slow and steady breath, raising her arms out high. In her heart she felt there was little choice. Last time she had hidden, now she was ready to fight out in the open.
'Ana no!' Shawn cried.
But it was too late. Annabel had summoned her magic. A great wall of roots shot up from the ground before them, creating a wall between them and the charging soldiers.
The horses screamed in terror, rearing up and bolting away, the soldiers caught by surprise fell back, some toppled from their horses, they began swarming around behind the wall of roots in confusion. And then the calls began as the roots above them grew into trees and sprouted bright green leaves and flowers.
'Weather Maker!' came the voices that circled amongst the men in the camp. 'There's a Weather Maker here!'
Roots shot out towards their enemy, killing soldier and horses alike, ripping them limb from limb.
Shawn stepped back as a horse's head was thrown to his feet.
He lifted his eyes slowly back towards the massacre. Some of the men tried to fight, some retreated.
Shawn spotted amongst the riders, a soldier wearing fine armour bearing the crest of a wolf running up a mountainside. He watched as the prince wheeled his horse around and rode, back up the hill and away. Only a handful of the attacking men survived.
When it was all over, Annabel let out a deep breath, looking over what she had done, looking over the mangled mass of torn bodies around them, and their own men that remained; now cowering in fear.
When it was all over, Shawn strode up to her, grabbing her by the shoulders and shaking her.
'What have you done!?' he shouted at her. 'What have you done!?'
'Shawn…' Annabel stammered. 'I couldn't…...I had to protect us…'
'The king will know…he will know about you….' his nails dug into her shoulder painfully as he began to tremble, fingers turning white, '…he will hunt you down…'
'Shawn…' she whimpered. 'I'm sorry…'
He embraced her then, forcefully so, glaring at the scene behind her.
'It's ok' he whispered. 'I will protect you if anything happens…I promise…'
Annabel held him back, her relief turning to sorrow. She began to cry into his shoulder.

'It's ok' Woodworm said calmly as he wandered through the aftermath, surveying the carnage that surrounded them. 'We have more men hidden elsewhere, under Tristan's control. They will be kept safe until we need them.'
He stepped over the twisted and gnarled roots of a fallen tree, the earth around him torn up. His foot lowered into a shallow puddle of blood as he walked onwards, following Adam who moved slowly. The bodies were all around them.
'This is where we split then' Adam said, wiping blood from his eyes. He raised his head, speaking loudly to all so that he may be heard. 'They are sure to return with more men, but at least we have more time now. So' he called coming to a stop. 'Who goes where?'

Chapter Thirty-Nine
Dancing Across the Map

‘Wait!’ Farrell called after Arlen as he boarded the ship.
‘What?’ Arlen shot back without turning.
‘Where will you meet us when you return?’
‘You already know the answer to that’ Arlen replied simply. ‘By the mountains. By the coast. From there we will meet with the rest of the prince’s army.’
‘When will you be back?’ Farrell shouted at him from the harbour.
‘Who knows? A week. A month…?’
‘What if I don’t see you again?’
‘I don’t care!’ Arlen hollered, turning to face him at last. ‘I hate you. Don’t you understand this by now? I hate you! I don’t care if I never see you again. I don’t care if you die!’
‘Do you really mean that Arlen?’ Farrell sighed weakly, walking along the harbour to keep Arlen in sight as the gangplank was pulled back onto the ship.
‘You mean nothing to me!’ Arlen called to him. ‘I will never forgive what you have done.’
He strode away, swiftly disappearing from view on the ship.
Farrell watched miserably as the ship slowly sailed away. Taking with it Annabel, for her own protection now that she had revealed her existence to the king’s soldiers, and Shawn of course who insisted on staying by her side. Cam also had boarded the ship with his wife Tala, who insisted on them both returning to the soil where they had been born, their true home. To them it always would be, no matter what had happened. With them, went as many others as they could fit on the ship.
Farrell watched as the ship headed out to sea to begin its journey back again to the other land across the water.
‘So, are we ready to go?’ an impatient voice interrupted Farrell’s thought loudly.
Farrell saw nearby, Woodworm who had spoken. Beside him, were Barrel, Adam and the newly named Flynn, once known as Flute Stick. And behind them, were the rest of the men that waited. Those that had survived the attack and could not all fit on the ship, they were only a handful in number.
‘I take it we’re heading back to the mountains’ Adam was saying behind Farrell, ‘where the others wait.’
‘What?’ Farrell hesitated. ‘Oh…. yes…I suppose.’
‘Let’s get going then’ Woodworm said. ‘Before they find us.’

That evening when they had travelling a distance away from the harbour, they came to rest in a section of forest, daring even to light several smaller fires. The trees were thick around them, and it was unlikely that they would be seen from afar. Even so, lookouts were positioned at certain points all around them, there was even one man sitting high up in a tree so that he may see further away.
Farrell sat alone before a small fire, staring off into the flames, thinking about the conversation he had had with Adam not long before.
‘We’re running out of money’ Adam had said. ‘Soon we will have nothing left.’

Farrell had gritted his teeth and bit his lip in worry at that.
'Where is the prince' he had said. 'Has he left us? Has he betrayed us?'
Now he sat before the fire, preoccupied with thoughts, wracked with worry and fear.
He was interrupted by a man that came to him, one of the prisoners that were saved from across the sea.
'Excuse me' the man mumbled.
Farrell's eyes lifted, and he stared back at the man in momentary confusion.
'Oh' Farrell said. 'What is it?'
'I was wondering what we were doing here?'
'Haven't you already been told?' Farrell asked him straightening up. 'Your freedom in exchange for your help in finding a Weather Maker named Amaia.'
'Oh yes' the man smiled bobbing his head. 'I remember now.' He nodded again. 'A Weather Maker you say? I've never heard of…nor seen one until very recently. That thing that young lady did earlier…. god…. that was….'
'What do you want?' Farrell interrupted.
'I was just wondering' the man continued hastily, 'why are we trying to find this Amaia Weather Maker?'
'Because she is in danger' Farrell replied as if it was obvious.
'But many people are in danger every day. Why do you care so much about this one?'
'She's my daughter.'
'Oh' the man said, seemingly genuinely surprised. He took a seat on the dry earth opposite Farrell, the fire burning between them. 'Well she must be very dear to you indeed. What does she look like?'
'What?'
'What does she look like?' the man repeated.
'I…...I don't know.'
'You don't know?' the man chuckled to himself. 'What…were you wearing a blindfold all her life?'
Farrell let out a very heavy groan, slumping and resting his chin on his palm.
'How come you don't know what your own daughter looks like?' the man persisted.
'Because' Farrell droned, 'she was only seven years old when she was taken.'
'By the king?'
'Yes.'
'Why?'
'Because she is a Weather Maker.'
'Yeah but why?'
'I don't know.'
'And how long ago was she taken.'
'Twelve years.'
'And you've been looking for her all this time?'
'No, only recently' Farrell grumbled.
'God above us what took you so long?' the old man asked loudly slapping his knee. 'Did you forget about her all that time? What does her mother think of all of this?'
'I wouldn't know' Farrell sighed. 'She's dead.'

‘I see’ the man scratched his chin thoughtfully.
‘You don’t know what your daughter looks like’ the man repeated thoughtfully to himself.
‘No.’
‘Do you remember what her mother looked like? Your wife I assume? Or lover?’
‘Yes, I remember what my wife looked like’ Farrell said wearily, resting his elbows on his knees and staring at the man.
‘How old would your daughter be now? Nineteen?’
‘Yes.’
‘Could you describe what your wife looked like? In detail. The shape of her face her eyes her mouth, nose…’
‘Why?’
‘Just humour me.’
‘Well’ Farrell said thoughtfully, leaning back and bowing his head. ‘She was…beautiful…’
‘Details’ the man said sharply. ‘Shapes, textures, colours….’

Elsewhere in the camp, one of the other former prisoners approached Adam as he sat with Woodworm and Barrel, trying to cook sausages on a tiny fire.
‘So, what's your story then?’ the prisoner asked them. ‘Who are you all and why are you here?’
‘Oh us?’ Woodworm said. ‘We’re just mercenaries. In it for the excitement. Right Barrel?’ Barrel laughed back at him in agreement.
‘Are those really your names?’ the prisoner asked. ‘Woodworm and Barrel?’
‘The only ones you need to know’ Woodworm replied inspecting his sausage briefly before holding it back over the fire.
‘And what about you’ the prisoner asked Adam. ‘You're no mercenary. I know that. You’ve more discipline.’
‘How can you tell?’ Adam asked, speaking over Woodworms protests at being referred to as lacking in discipline.
‘I was a soldier myself before I was imprisoned. It was all a mix up though. Our government…our king…everything is always corrupted.’ He glanced over towards Flynn, one of the men who kept watch, and the only one who had volunteered to do so. ‘I recognise him’ the prisoner said staring at Flynn. ‘I know him. We were imprisoned together. He probably won’t remember me though. I left that prison soon enough, only to be dumped in another. At least the one you found me in was not as bad as the one I had left.’ The former prisoner looked back at the three around the fire. ‘He suffers night terrors does he not?’
‘How do you know?’ Woodworm asked him.
‘Hmm’ the man bowed his head. ‘Many who survived from that prison did, and many perhaps still do.’
‘What happened there?’ Woodworm asked, speaking over Barrel’s childish giggles. ‘Carrot…I mean Cam was the same.’
‘Oh’ the prisoner sighed shaking his head. ‘Horrible things’ he said. ‘Horrible. Tortures I didn’t even know existed. You all would be the same had you lived through what *they* lived through.’ He glanced back at Flynn. ‘He’s lucky to be alive.’ He looked back at Adam. ‘Anyway’ he said. ‘Who are you? A former soldier I'm guessing?’

‘You guessed right’ Adam nodded. ‘I used to fight in our king’s army.’
‘What made you turn against him?’
‘He kidnapped my daughter thinking she might be a…...a Weather Maker’ he said, sneering at the words on his lips. How he hated those words. ‘I tried to free her, defying the kings order in doing so…...he forced me to watch her die.’ He lifted his heavy eyes towards the man again. ‘I will never forget the terror and panic in her that day, and despite my many years of service and my loyalty…. the king only cared that I had disobeyed him, not that my daughter in the end was not a what he thought she was.’ He spoke to the ground now, his tone casual as he did so. ‘Not until the day I die, will I ever forget that look in her eyes…. she knew she was going to die……..I will never forget that look.....that horror…..’
After a time, the nameless prisoner spoke again. ‘What does the king want the Weather Makers for?’
‘I don’t know.’
‘I have just one more question’ the prisoner added, jerking his thumb towards Barrel who had been laughing the whole time. ‘Why does *he* keep laughing? What's so funny?’
‘I don’t know, he’s always like that’ Adam spoke as Barrel continued to cackle.
‘Yeah he is’ Woodworm agreed. ‘I've tried to beat it out of him. Doesn’t work. Best get used to it.’

Sometime later, the man that had spoken to Farrell returned to him.
‘Here’ he said handing a rolled-up piece of paper to him. ‘For you.’
Farrell took it uncertainly. He unrolled it and blinked in confusion. The face of the young woman drawn on the paper looked much like the face of the young woman he had seen over and over again in his dreams.
Find me…
‘What is this?’ Farrell said.
‘It’s your daughter’ the man replied. ‘Or at least…what she might look like. I drew it in charcoal…from the fire.’
‘It’s a very good picture.’ Farrell glanced up at man. ‘Where does a soldier find time to learn such skills?’
‘Oh, I'm not a soldier’ the man replied. ‘I'm an artist.’
‘An art…what were you doing imprisoned with other soldiers and mercenaries in that place?’
‘I was accused of practicing sorcery. The punishment is to be drowned in the sea, far off coast…somewhere deep where it would be near impossible to find you again. Of course,’ the man smiled, ‘if I am a sorcerer as they believed me to be, I would be drowning forever and ever. Sorceresses are believed to live forever. It is believed they cannot die.’ He sighed. ‘I almost wish I were what they claimed me to be. Wouldn’t it be amazing to have such power?’
‘What nonsense do you foreigners believe in?’ Farrell scoffed.
‘Not all believe in such things’ the man smiled again. ‘It does sound ridiculous I know. Sorcerers do not exist, or at least I've never seen one. Don’t even know what they look like.’
‘So how come you weren’t thrown into the sea?’ Farrell asked him.

‘My wife was trying to secure a trail to show all those who accused me were false, and that I am just a normal man…’ he broke off, ‘…. I don’t suppose I shall ever see her again…..or my two children.
‘You may still’ Farrell told him.
The man smiled silently.
‘Thank you’ Farrell said, rolling the paper up again.
‘You are most welcome’ the man bowed and walked away.
That night, as Farrell slept, he heard singing.
In his dreams, he walked through the woods towards the voice and found Ramana standing there, waiting for him. She smiled when she saw him, ending her song, and slowly drifted away. He followed.
They walked side by side in silence beneath the falling leaves, their footsteps rustling on the earth below them. The low sun shining through the columns of the trees.
And Farrell was happy.

The next day they set off again, heading towards the mountains.
Along the way they came across a small town called Pentland, where they stopped to rest and buy more food with what little money they had left. It was here they met a man.
When that man spotted Barrel, he threw his head back in laughter.
‘Well if it isn’t Bill returned to me after all this time. What a pleasure it is to see you boy.’
Barrel instantly paled, quaking in fear and falling to his knees before the man.
‘Please’ he stammered. ‘Please don’t hurt me father.’

Chapter Forty
The Land across the Sea

Arlen stood on the deck, leaning forward against the wood, watching the waves lapping against the side of the ship as they sailed onwards.
Beside him Shawn stood.
‘Do we have to return?’ Shawn spoke after a time.
Arlen straightened and turned to him, his attention then sliding towards Annabel who sat on the deck further away on the ship. The tune she played on her violin was a beautiful one, yet sad. These sorts were all she played nowadays, she seemed to notice nothing around her, but was entranced by the melody that she created.
‘You love her, don’t you?’
Shawn looked away in silence.
‘I know you want to protect her’ Arlen went on, ‘but you can’t.’
‘We dragged her into this’ Shawn replied at last. ‘She should not suffer because of us.’
‘The king dragged her into this’ Arlen answered. ‘She suffers because of *him*.’

‘I only wish that at the end of all of this, she returns home to her family. Her parents don’t know where she is. Perhaps they even think her dead.’ Shawn took a deep and steady breath. ‘I just want her to return home safely’ he said. ‘I just want her to be happy.’
‘Yeah’ Arlen nodded. ‘Me too.’
‘Do you mean what you said earlier’ Shawn asked him, ‘about it being near impossible for us to succeed in our task, and that we were doomed from the start?’
Arlen barely glanced at him.
‘Do you really believe the words you spoke’ Shawn continued.
‘Yes’ Arlen replied sombrely. ‘I did.’
‘But…’ Shawn stammered uncertainly. ‘Why do you think that?’
‘She’s been gone for twelve years’ Arlen replied in a dead tone. ‘The odds of her being alive….’
‘But you…’ Shawn began, ‘then why are we still looking for her?’
‘Because’ Arlen said, ‘she is the last thing left in this world that I truly care about. Ramana’s daughter…the woman I love…. Even if there is only a glimmer of hope….as small as a drop in the ocean, then I would take it. I've already lost Ramana, that pain is bad enough…and I would willingly give my life for Amaia to be found alive and safe.’ Arlen began to blink several times. Shawn saw tears coming to his eyes. ‘I can’t put into words’ Arlen said his voice breaking, ‘how much she means to me, how desperately I wish to find her.’ He gritted his teeth, gripping the wood of the ship beneath him with whitening fingers. ‘She is the last reminder I have of Ramana…. the only woman I ever truly loved….’
Arlen turned away from Shawn to hide his grief, pulling from his coat a small tin that opened up. On one side there was a mirror, on the other, a thin tray of black paint and a small brush. Arlen began to apply this to his eyes after dabbing them dry.
‘Why do you paint your eyes like that?’ Shawn asked him. ‘You never used to.’
‘It hides who I used to be’ Arlen replied shortly. ‘I'm not the man I once was.’

‘That really is a beautiful tune’ Tala said to Annabel when she had finished her song.
Annabel lowered her violin, facing the woman now.
‘I find you intriguing’ Tala went on, coming to sit next to her. ‘Who are you and what are you doing here?’
‘I could ask the same of you’ Annabel replied, resting her violin and bow on her lap.
Tala smirked at her. ‘You go first’ she said.
‘I lived with my parents until about a year ago. I was…how do I put this……my powers make me different from others. I was…’ Annabel chewed her lip in thought. ‘Some soldiers appeared in my village, they tried to kidnap me. I was saved by a group of mercenaries, Shawn…’ Annabel indicated him, standing beside Arlen a short distance away and watching her, ‘was one of them. I was taken away from my home. I cannot go back for fear of endangering my parents’ Annabel said. ‘I cannot go back, until all of this is over.’
‘Do your parents know where you are?’ Tala asked her.
‘No’ Annabel shook her head sadly. ‘I……left in a hurry……of sorts. They don’t know where I am.’
‘I'm sorry’ Tala said.

Annabel smiled at her. ‘What about you?’ she said. ‘I've never seen a woman like you before.’
Tala looked down herself.
She wore lamina armour, leather and plates of gold. Over the armour in places, around her waist, chest and shoulders she wore fabrics of red, maroon and blue, all imprinted with gold diamonds. At her waist there was a scimitar.
Tala glanced up at Annabel again.
‘It’s hotter in my country than it is in yours’ she explained.
‘I know’ Annabel nodded. ‘I've been there.’
‘Our country is very different from yours’ Tala went on. ‘In our country, it is normal for women to fight, in some cases it is even expected. We are of course not as strong as men, but we can still cause some lasting damage.’ She tilted her head at Annabel. ‘I’d say about one third of people in our king’s army are women.’
‘Have you killed many people?’
‘Oh yes.’
‘I’d love to learn how to fight’ Annabel said with envy. ‘I’d love to learn how to use a sword.’
‘I’d love to be able to do what you do’ Tala said. ‘When I saw what happened earlier…’ she seemed lost for words for several seconds. ‘It took my breath away. I've never seen such a thing. The very earth answers your call.’ She sighed dreamily. ‘You could learn how to use a sword, but no one can learn how to do what you can do. How did you become so powerful?’
‘Practice’ Annabel answered. ‘Nothing more.’
‘Were you born with these powers?’
‘Yes. But they only developed when I began to mature and grow into a woman. After I left my home, they grew stronger still, as I was more often put into a position where I was forced to use them.’
‘Then perhaps it was a good thing you were taken’ Tala said.
Annabel smirked at this. ‘Life…’ she said, ‘takes us on strange paths.’
‘It does indeed’ Tala nodded. ‘I never thought I would see Cam again. I thought him to be dead.’
‘He is your husband?’
‘Yes, but he was taken from me.’
Annabel was about to speak, when there came a scream of terror from the deck below them, a scream that came from Cam.
Tala instantly tensed; then ran towards the source of the noise, as she went one of the other soldiers nearby grumbled to himself.
‘Not this again’ he said.
Annabel stayed where she was as Tala ran to the lower deck and burst into Cam’s room, rushing over to him.
‘Cam. Cam!’
‘No!’ he screamed again. ‘Get away from me! Please!’
‘Cam it’s me!’ Tala begged. ‘Wake up! Please!’
It took several seconds to calm him, but at last Cam fell silent, shaking, his skin beaded with sweat.

‘Oh my poor Cam’ Tala said miserably as she held his hands in hers. ‘What happened to you…?’

Arlen stared down at Cam without emotion, watching from the doorway as Tala worried and cried over her poor husband.
‘What do we do now?’ Shawn asked from beside him. ‘The money the prince gave us is swiftly running out.’
‘I have a friend in the foreign land where we are heading’ Arlen replied flatly. ‘He may be able to help us.’
‘May he?’ Shawn asked him. ‘How well do you know this man who lives so far away?’
‘A lot has happened since I left my home twelve years ago. In that absence…. I’ve been busy….’
Shawn looked away from him, and back down to the couple before them.
He wondered what had happened to Arlen in his years of absence, what had happened to Cam that caused him to have such terrible dreams every night, what would happen to himself and Annabel in the future.
‘Is life always this uncertain?’ Shawn asked Arlen.
‘Life is always uncertain.’

Chapter Forty-One
Past Events

He didn’t know when it first began, couldn’t remember that far back, but he grew up thinking it was normal, and living every day in fear.

‘Bill’ called a voice. ‘Bill! Come here.’
Bill scurried across the kitchen towards his mother, clutching his little toy horse to his chest.
‘Take your sister’ his mother hissed to him wide-eyed, ‘and hide somewhere safe. Your father’s coming.’
‘Come on Violet’ Bill said to his younger sister beside him, taking her by the hand and running with her to the next room.
He waited there behind that closed door, watching through the crack as his mother stared out the window, biting her lip the way she always did when she was nervous or scared.
Behind him his sister Violet clutched at his sleeve tightly, clinging onto him.
‘It’s ok little sister’ Bill whispered back to her. ‘I'm here.’
Bill looked back through the crack, leaning into the door and breathing as quietly as he could through his mouth.
Then came the noise they dreaded.
The front door opened, and heavy boots came stomping in.
‘Where are the children?’ came a booming voice.

‘They are outside playing my dear’ his mother replied. She sounded happy, but Bill could hear the edge in her voice and the way it wavered.
‘Where’s my food? Why haven’t you cooked anything?’
There was silence, and then the sound of someone being slapped.
Bill saw nothing through the crack as his parents went out of sight, but he heard the beating, and then he heard the begging.
He withdrew quickly from the door as he heard his father’s boots approaching, dragging his sister with him and hiding with her in a cupboard nearby before either of them were seen.
His father opened the door and stormed through the room, then back outside, perhaps to go look for them. But Bill dared not leave the cupboard, not even to check on his mother. He was too frightened, and could only imagine how his poor sister was feeling.
They stayed there for hours, listening for their father.
Everything in the house would fall still again, and things would calm down. Only then did the pair feel safe to leave their hiding place.
It was always the same afterwards. Afterwards he would tell her how sorry he was, and how much he loved her, and how he would never do it again.
But it was all a lie.
Nothing changed.

Things would continue the same way every day, but as the years went on, things became worse. It was every single day now that his father would raise his voice and say the most horrible things to his mother, and Violet began to cry.
‘Shut her up!’ his father would yell at Bill. ‘Shut her up!’
And then he would round on his mother, raising his hand to her again as if it was *her* fault. But this time it didn’t happen behind closed doors, and Bill saw everything, cowering in the corner of the kitchen, cradling his crying sister in his arms. Covering her ears and forcing her head to face his so she did not see.
One day, Bill had had enough, and he came to stand between his mother and father the next time it happened. His father Bill thought, must have only backed down in surprise, because the next time Bill tried to protect his mother, he took her place.
His mother screamed as his father beat him, kicking him and punching him, backing down only when he seemed to tire. She cradled him afterwards, crying as she held him, and speaking to him harshly.
‘Why did you do that?’ she would say. ‘Why?’
‘I had to protect you mother’ Bill answered back weakly, aching all over. ‘I had to.’
In the corner of the room, Violet cried.
His mother told him not to do it again, but Bill wouldn’t listen, and in the days and years that followed, his father would turn more of his attention onto Bill, and less on his mother.
Bill suffered terribly for it, but he felt happier, because at least now he was protecting his mother. But the day would come, Bill would think in his head, when he would be big enough to hit him back.
Those were the days he feared the most.

It was many years later, when Bill and Violet had grown up a bit more, that their mother vanished.
'Where is she?!' Bill screamed at his father.
'Don't you speak to me like that' he father warned him, pointing a finger at him.
'Where is she?!' Bill repeated again, banging his fists on the table.
His father rose from his seat, starting towards him. But Bill was ready, with one hand he blocked the fist his father aimed at him, with the other, he struck him back. But he was still young, and only in his teens. His father was able to overpower him easily, and when Bill was on the floor, he didn't kick him like Bill was used to, instead went over to the stove.
'No!' Bill cried, throwing his hands up in submission, seeing what his father was about to do. But it was no use, his father emptied the kettle over him, and that's when he screamed.
His sister came rushing in, falling to her knees by Bill.
'Oh gods…' her voice was shaking, as were her hands when she touched him. 'What have you done?' she shrieked up at her father, holding her brother protectively.
His father didn't answer, only grabbed her by her upper arm, and dragged her to the bedroom. Violet called for Bill, and Bill called for Violet. But it was no use. Bill couldn't help her; he couldn't even stand now, due to an injury in his leg. Instead he was made to lay where he was, listing to his sister screaming in the next room, and hating himself for not being able to do anything about it.

It was many years after that, when Violet went missing.
At breakfast the next morning after she had failed to return home, Bill crossed the kitchen quietly, preparing his food slowly, but never taking his eyes off his father as he went about his business.
His father, eating his own breakfast leisurely, didn't look at him.
Bill sat opposite him, eggs and sausages and toast piled on his plate, which he didn't touch.
'Where is she?' he whispered to his father.
His father looked up.
'What?'
'Where is she?' Bill whispered again.
'Who?'
'My *sister'* Bill said through gritted teeth.
'I think she might have run away' his father said dismissively, staring back down at his plate and beginning to eat.
'I don't believe you.'
'I don't care' his father said raising his head again.
Bill's heart was hammering inside his chest, he did not break his gaze with his father, but stared defiantly back at him, until his father looked down again, and continued to eat.
Bill left the table without touching his food, and wandered through the woods by his home.
It was many years later, when he found something there that shocked him. His sister's bracelet, one he had gotten her for her birthday, a thing she had cherished, buried within a pile of bones.

He was waiting for his father that evening, standing by the door with a heavy hammer in his shaking hands. And when his father walked through the door, Bill swung as hard as he could at his head.
He fell like a stone. Bill threw away the hammer, stepping over his father and dragging him across the kitchen to one of the chairs where he proceeded to tie him up. But before he finished tying all his limbs, his father came around.
He roared in fury, lunging for Bill who leapt back in shock. Bill then turned instantly towards the hammer he had discarded, making a start for it. But his father was already untying himself from the chair, and Bill had lost his advantage.
Without words or explanation, Bill swung at his father again, this time facing him. His father caught the hammer, and managed to part it from him, striking Bill and sending him reeling. Bill stumbled and fell to his knees, when he felt his father's fist on the back of his head he collapsed on his front.
His father grabbed him by the hair, putting a knee on his back so he could not get up.
'*I HATE YOU*!' Bill snarled back at him through bloodied teeth as his father lifted his head back.
His father didn't answer as he slammed Bill's head over and over again against the hard floor.
He eventually after the longest time got off his back, lifting him on his feet and dragging him across the kitchen. Bill fighting to stay conscious could not resist, weak and concussed, he could not fight back as his father grabbed him roughly again by his hair, and plunged his head into a bucket of water.
The icy water suddenly woke him, bringing him crashing back to reality. His father released him, lifting his head out of the water for the briefest moment before forcing him back in. Bill began to panic, reaching desperately to the table beside him and fumbling for anything that could help him. He found a knife, stabbing his father's hand and managing to free himself.
He threw his head back, drawing a deep breath of air and sparing nothing before lunging for the fallen hammer again.
But his father having recovered faster than Bill had anticipated, grabbed him before he could reach it, and Bill sobbed in despair as he was dragged back, and the hammer moved further away from him.
This time his father did not take him back to the bucket, but to the burning stove. His father grabbed his head again, forcing his head down upon it. Bill screamed, as the heat burned one side of his face.

He stumbled out of the door, not knowing how he had escaped his father, he ran through the village and away from his father's cursing as he made after him.
Bill fled into the woods, hearing his father following some distance behind him.
He ran for only a short time in a blind panic before he stumbled and fell, landing awkwardly on a fallen tree. The moss on the bark was damp beneath his hands.
He could hear his father somewhere in the woods behind him calling for him, cursing him, swearing to do all sorts of horrible things to him once he caught him.
Bill let out a sob, biting into his hand to keep himself silent. He felt no pain, only adrenaline.

He had nowhere to go, believing he couldn't survive in this world on his own, and remembering what he had found in the woods of his sister that day.
'I should have protected her' Bill whimpered to himself. 'I should have been able to save her….'
Behind him his father's voice was coming closer. Bill dared to glance back. He could just see his father's silhouette in the trees, and he was heading his way.
Bill didn't run, he only froze, thinking in his mind. He couldn't leave, and he couldn't stay.
Maybe I should let him have me he thought. *And face the same fate as my mother and sister….and join them both in death…*
He heard a twig snapping nearby, and jerked his head around, seeing standing before him a man he didn't recognise.
'Hey there kid' the man frowned down at him. 'Are you alright?'
And then the man glanced past him, and towards his father as he came tearing through the trees and into the open.
'I'm going to fucking rip you limb from limb boy!' he screamed.
Bill rolled on his back to face him, pale with shock and unable to utter a word.
'Is that your father?' the stranger asked Bill glumly. 'He doesn't seem very nice, does he?'
'Who the fuck are you?!' the father yelled at the stranger. 'Leave this place wanderer, you don't belong here.'
'Maybe I should teach him a lesson' the stranger spoke down to Bill, who didn't answer, but seemed to have slipped into shock.
The stranger hummed thoughtfully to himself, stepping over the fallen tree Bill leant against, and drawing his sword as he did so.
A brief encounter, and his father stepped back, clutching the wounds on his arm and chest where the stranger had slashed him.
'Leave now old man' the stranger called to him. 'Go back where you came from.'
Bill's father glared at the stranger, holding his injures which bled profusely.
'You'd better not come home boy' he growled to his son, before turning on his heel and stalking off.
'Hey' the stranger said to Bill once his father had gone. 'Are you ok?'
Bill stared up at him silently, as if he couldn't believe what had just happened.
'You're safe now' the man said. 'My name is William. What's your name?'
Bill stared at him, and then began to laugh.

Chapter Forty-Two
Things that Happen

Bill's father had found their pursuers and told the prince Corvan everything he needed to know. Farrell and the others had tried to escape by heading through the mountains, but Corvan now knew where they were and which way they were heading. They stood no chance to outrun them on foot. They were swiftly found and captured. The king, who had taken a

special interest in them because of Annabel, had travelled in person to see them. But even though Annabel was long gone, the king would accept no excuse or reason. He had expressed surprise at first sight of Farrell especially, but Adam also. But it made little difference who they were or what services they had provided him in the past. None of that mattered anymore.
'I have to have her' the king insisted again.
'Why do you want her?' Farrell groaned.
'I've never come across a Weather Maker that fights like that. If she is as I've been told she is, then she is the most powerful I've come across yet.'
'She's not more powerful' Farrell tried to reason. 'She's just more experienced.'
'She is stronger than the others' the king insisted.
'No she isn't!' Farrell shouted back.
The king sighed wearily, turning back to the torturer.
'Continue.'
The burly man again tightened the giant screw which trapped Farrell's arm. Farrell threw his head back, screaming in agony as the bones in his hand were crushed.
Sometime later, Farrell was taken away and returned to the other where he lay, falling asleep in minutes.
That night, he dreamed of Ramana.
They were sitting on a beach together, the small waves rolling up the sand and tickling their feet, before retreating and returning again.
Farrell glanced to the side. Ramana was smiling at him. She looked so happy, so beautiful. She leant towards him, pushing him back down against the sand, and resting her body weight upon his. Her long dark hair fell forwards; as she bent down to kiss him, shielding them from the world.
Farrell's arms came up slowly as he kissed her back, caressing her body. It felt so good.

The next day Farrell was brought before the torturer again, and the king began to question.
'I don't know' Farrell answered, his voice shaking. 'Please…no more.'
He screamed again, as the burly man pressed the red-hot brand against his naked skin. A new burn to join the many others that now covered his back. Tied firmly to a tree and unable to move, he was forced to endure the agonizing process.
Sometime later he was taken away to rest and recover, and the next man was brought forwards.
Things had continued this way for some time, but the king insisted that he would wait for Arlen and the others to return, with Annabel. No matter how long it took.
'I must have her' the king repeated time and again. 'I must. Now tell me where she is.'
'I don't know' Adam said firmly. 'They set sail and vanished. We don't know where they went or when they will be back. If they're even coming back at all!'
'It's not good enough' the king shook his head. 'Continue' he said to the torturer.
Adam screwed his eyes tight shut, gritting his teeth. His screams of pain echoed through the camp, sending terror into the hearts of every prisoner there.
Every time it was a constant reminder to each person, that *they* might be next.

One evening, Flynn woke screaming and thrashing around. Cam was not there to comfort and protect him, instead one of the other prisoners tried to hold him down, which made him panic even more.
'Shut him up' Farrell hissed under his breath to the man desperately. 'Flynn' he snarled to him 'Be *quiet!*'
But it was too late. The king's soldiers who were given the order to 'get rid of him' were he to cause a disruption again, had already heard him.
Flynn was dragged out of the group by one of the soldiers, pulled away from the other prisoner who had tried to silence him. Fully awake now, Flynn screamed in panic, knowing what would happen. But no one was able to help him.
The others watched helplessly as he was dragged by the soldier to a more secluded area and restrained, while another soldier drove a dagger through his throat, silencing him forever.
He collapsed, and his body was dragged away before he had even stopped bleeding.
It had all been done very quickly.
Another soldier moved close to the prisoners, looming over them dangerously to see if any would make a noise or protest. Within the group Bill sunk his teeth into his own hand to stop himself laughing, biting down so hard he caused himself to bleed, but he made almost no sound. Nearby Woodworm watched silently, his face looked carved out of stone, and beside him, Adam blinked back tears, covering his mouth in shock. But none within their group made another sound.
A few weeks after that, one of the king's soldiers shouted a message across the camp.
'Your majesty! A ship has arrived at the coast. I think it's the one we've been waiting for.'
Farrell's breath and heart quickened in fear. He waited nervously for what might happen next.
A messenger was sent down to the coast to meet the new arrivals and bring them to the camp.
When Arlen arrived with a handful of other men, Shawn being among them but Annabel not, and a shady character in a hood and cloak standing close beside Arlen, the king stepped forward to speak.
'Who is in charged amongst you?' the king called.
'I am' Arlen called back loudly, he and his companions standing a distance away from the king.
The king indicated to one of his soldiers to bring Farrell forwards, who waited amongst the other prisoners. He was thrown on his knees before the king.
Farrell straightened up, blinking wearily at Arlen before him. It had been a long time they had been apart, and Farrell's health, along with the others that were kept imprisoned, had greatly deteriorated. Over the days that Farrell had lost count of, malnourishment and physical torture and constant fear had made Farrell a ghost of who he used to be. But Arlen still recognised him; Farrell could see it in his eyes.
'Do you know this man?' the king called out to Arlen.
'Yes' Arlen called back.
'Good.' The king held his hand open to one of his soldiers, and the soldier handed him a loaded crossbow.
The king took the crossbow, and pointed it at Farrell's head.
'Tell me where Annabel is' the king shouted, 'or I kill him!'

Farrell began to panic, eyes darting all around him for some escape, heart racing, body sweating, and the last words Arlen had spoken to him ringing in his mind.
I hate you. Don't you understand this by now? I hate you! I don't care if I never see you again. I don't care if you die!
He glanced across the clearing towards his brother.
Arlen stared back at him coolly, then exchanged a glance with the hooded man beside him.

Chapter Forty-Three
An Old Friend

Two months ago

They arrived on shore and docked at the harbour of Elton; Arlen spoke to the dock master and signed the correct papers, returning shortly after to the others on the ship.
'What do we do now?' Shawn asked him.
'I have to find my friend' Arlen replied. 'The journey is a bit of a long one I'm afraid. I'll meet you back here when I return. I might be a while.'
'I'll come with you' Shawn told him. 'I don't want to hang around here for ages, I'll get bored.'
'Then I'm coming too' Annabel spoke up.
Arlen glanced from one to the other.
'Fine' he answered shortly. 'If you're sure.'
The men who were to remain on the ship were told of the situation. They had enough food to last them a while, and after a brief explanation, Arlen, Shawn and Annabel made their way.
They walked to the nearest town where they found an inn that rented out horses, a town called Slikver. They took three of them, then rode the long distance to find Arlen's friend, leaving Cam and Tala and all the others back on the ship to wait for them.
'What can you tell us about this man then Arlen?' Annabel asked him as they rode. 'Who is he?'
Arlen frowned uncertainly, 'well' he sighed, 'I'm not too sure myself.'
'I thought you knew him well' Shawn said.
'I do…. of sorts.' Arlen frowned in thought. 'He is a mysterious character, and very dangerous. He has many identities, and lives many different lives…I don't think even *he* knows who he truly is.' Arlen gazed out at the lands around them. The earth was dry and rocky, tall grasses with little purple flowers grew around them in patches, shaking back and forth in the light breeze. Upon one of the rocks near them, Arlen saw a bright yellow fleshy lizard, with jet black eyes staring at them as they went by. 'He is an assassin' Arlen continued, as they walked their horses slowly onwards along the deserted road, 'and a

veteran, a body guard, a master of deception…a master of lies and poisons and secrets and shadows…'
'He sounds like quite a character' Annabel said uncertainly. 'What makes you think he will help us?'
'Because he is my friend' Arlen said. 'I am one of the very few, that he truly trusts in this world.'
'Then how will we find him?' Annabel asked with a hint of worry in her voice.
'He's retired' Arlen replied. 'He stays in one place now.'
'Why?'
'He's been retired' Arlen answered, 'ever since his son was born.' He glanced sideways at Shawn and Annabel beside him. 'But that's supposed to be a secret' he told them. 'As far as either of you two are concerned, he doesn't have a son. Can you remember that?'
'Sure' Shawn replied. 'But why?'
'He is a dangerous man' Arlen repeated, 'his enemies would use his loved ones against him if they could, that's why he keeps his son hidden and away. Most of the time he doesn't even dare to visit him, but that boy is the most precious thing in the world to him. He loves him more than he does his own mother.'
'And you know where his son lives?' Shawn asked him.
'Yes.'
Shawn nodded thoughtfully to himself. 'He must trust you a lot then, if he is as you say he is.'
'Yes' Arlen replied solemnly. 'He does.'

That evening they slept uncomfortably on thin mats rolled out on a relatively flat piece of earth, away from the road and hidden from view for safety beneath the open sky.
Annabel in the middle of the night woke abruptly at the sound of a shrill screeching coming from nearby, sitting bolt upright and gazing all around her for its source.
'It's ok' Shawn whispered as he lay beside her. 'It's just a sand-crawler.'
'You mean one of those freaky owl-like creatures' Annabel replied. 'I could never get used to that, what a horrid noise.'
Shawn sighed deeply, reaching out to take her by the shoulder and pushing her back down to lie beside him.
'Don't worry' he said to her. 'They don't like the taste of people.'
Annabel breathed deeply to calm herself, blinking slowly and staring up to the cloudless yet warm sky above.
'Just try to get back to sleep' Shawn muttered to her.
Annabel shuffled closer to him, grabbing his arm and laying it across her body as if it were a blanket.
'I won't get any peaceful sleep until we're indoors' Annabel whispered back to him.
Shawn's heart skipped a beat as she had moved closer and taken his arm. He watched her, the light from the moon in the clear sky above made the night bright around them, and he saw her clearly, thinking of how beautiful she was.

Shawn held her close to him, nuzzling into her and resting his chin against her shoulder. He glanced across at the sleeping profile of Arlen nearby. The strange calls of the foreign creatures in the night had not seemed to faze him at all, and he appeared to sleep peacefully.
Shawn allowed himself to relax again, holding Annabel and feeling her body heat against his. He closed his eyes, trying to sleep.
Beside him Annabel glanced back at him and smiled, closing her eyes too. She slept peacefully the rest of the night by Shawn's side, feeling safe beneath his arm. The next she heard a cry of a night creature, it didn't bother her so much. She felt safer now.

The next morning, Arlen woke with the light. He ate what little food they had brought with them, and waited for Shawn and Annabel to wake.
When the sun was fully above the horizon, he decided to wake them himself.
'Hey' he said loudly, shoving Shawn with his boot. 'Get up.'
Shawn blinked in confusion, waking suddenly, then glared in annoyance up at Arlen as Annabel rose to stand. 'Alright' he said in exasperation. 'I'm awake.'
'We're not far now' Arlen told them. 'Just a few more hours ride. Eat then we can go.'
Arlen waited patiently while Shawn and Annabel ate their meagre portions, then rolled up their sleeping mats and readied the horses to go.
'Ready?' Arlen asked as they each mounted their own horses.
'Ready' Shawn replied.
Arlen gave a nod of satisfaction, tapping his heels into his mare and sending the beast into a trot, heading back to the road and to relatively even ground.
Behind him, Shawn and Annabel exchanged a look before following. Annabel grinned at Shawn, as he kicked his horse on to follow Arlen's.

They reached their destination, a small village immediately on the outskirts of a large city. The city known as Darktonian. It was an unusual layout. Before them was a thriving city with stone buildings built atop of stone buildings and masses of people between, bustling and called out to one another as they walked upon the stone streets. And immediately on the edge of this city, separated as if by an invisible wall were wooden houses with thatched roofs, built spaciously around paddocks of sheep and goats.
'Do you know where this man lives? Shawn asked Arlen as they walked on foot beside their horses. 'Does he live in the city?'
'No' Arlen shook his head as they lingered on the border between the stone and wooden buildings. 'His is one of the houses on the edges.'
'Such a strange place' Annabel noted as she took in her surroundings. 'I've never seen anything like this before.'
They walked for only a short time before Arlen slowed to a stop before one of the houses.
'It's this one' he indicated.
Annabel and Shawn stood one step behind either side of him; together they saw the house Arlen pointed out. It was small and unremarkable, just like the many others that surrounded it. From an outside glance it looked as if there was only one room per floor, with four floors. The glass windows were small and beneath them growing in little baskets were a collection of flowers that grew of many colours.

‘Cosy’ Annabel beamed. ‘I like it.’
‘It’s not the kind of place I expected to find him’ Shawn mused to himself.
‘What did you expect?’ Arlen shrugged at him. ‘A dark cave at the bottom of a mountain? Or perhaps some hut in a swamp?’
‘No’ Shawn answered back. ‘I thought it would be …bigger.’
‘Hm. What for? He doesn’t own a lot of things, being on the move all the time. Or at least…that was the case before he retired.’
Arlen’s eyes travelled down the house to the front door, where there was a little old lady sitting in a chair by the front steps.
‘Come on’ he said, opening the tiny wooden gate that led to the house, leaving his horse tied to a post behind them to wait, ‘and don’t make eye-contact with the lady.’
‘What?’ Shawn scoffed.
‘Just trust me’ Arlen replied shortly.
As they approached the door, Shawn deliberately stared at her, to see what would happen. The lady was weak and frail looking; she had hair that was as white as snow, and eyes that were blood-shot red.
As they approached her, they could hear her mumbling.
‘…. decrease the population….no…. not like that…...’
Her eyesight was poor, and she only noticed them when they were almost at the door. She opened her mouth to address them.
‘Go fuck yourself you filthy wretch! I’ll see you drown in a pit of poisonous lava!’
‘Heavens above!’ Annabel declared, stepping back in shock, hand going to her mouth.
Immediately a younger lady rushed out of the house to confront them.
‘I’ll see you flayed alive you inbred swine!’ the old lady ranted on. ‘Go eat your own entrails you demon-spawn.’
‘Gods have mercy’ Shawn mumbled to himself as he watched her.
The young woman who had left the house glared at him.
‘There is only one god in this kingdom that we worship’ she told him bluntly. ‘And he does not concern himself with foreigners.’
Arlen shot a dark glare towards Shawn, a look that said he knew Shawn had deliberately disobeyed him.
‘Just keep your mouth shut and do as I say’ Arlen mumbled under his breath, before turning to the woman and ignoring Shawn. ‘Eilliah’ he said. ‘You don’t know me, but I know you. Tell me where the master of this house is.’
‘Is he expecting you?’
‘No.’
She narrowed her eyes suspiciously.
‘He would be more than happy to see me’ Arlen told her. ‘After all, fish are hard to catch with bare-hands.’
She visibly relaxed at that.
‘Talut is in the market’ she told him.
‘Thank you’ Arlen dipped his head.
‘It’s a big place’ the woman replied. ‘If you don’t find him there, come back and wait for him here.’

‘Of course,’ Arlen nodded.
Arlen marched swiftly away, heading to the city that was right on the doorstep of the home. The three of them left their horses tied up outside the small house; they entered the city.
‘What was that about?’ Shawn muttered after him when they were out of earshot of the woman who watched from the doorway them as they walked away.
‘What?’
‘What was that about the fish?’ Annabel whispered to him as they hurried after him.
‘Code’ Arlen answered simply. ‘Talut has many. It’s a good method for him to keep track of those he trusts, and those who wish to betray him.’
‘I hope it’s the right code’ Shawn asked dryly.
‘What if he means to kill us?’ Annabel worried aloud.
‘He doesn’t.’
‘He sounds a bit scary to me’ Annabel mumbled.
Arlen shook his head. ‘I think you’d be surprised. He is an approachable man, usually…at first. He uses a friendly demeanour to lull people into a false sense of security. Most people who meet him instantly like him. You’ll be the same’ he told them, ‘you’ll see.’
When they reached the edge of the market within the city, they found that the man they sought was already waiting for them.
‘Arlen my good friend!’ the man cried throwing his arms open. ‘It’s been a long time, a very long time!’
‘Talut’ Arlen acknowledged. ‘I should have known you’d be waiting for us.’
‘Was I waiting for you’ Talut asked, ‘or did I bring you here?’ he smirked at Arlen. ‘And who is this fine young couple?’
‘Shawn and Annabel’ Arlen told him.
‘Are they lovers?’ Talut asked instantly. ‘They *are* lovers!’ he cried at their reaction to his words as Shawn and Annabel glanced awkwardly at each other before looking away. ‘No’ Talut corrected himself. ‘They want to be…. but perhaps are too afraid to admit it to each other. Take my advice’ he said wagging a finger at them. ‘Take the chance while it’s there, or else it might just be too late.’
Shawn hissed at him, baring his teeth and snarling in annoyance.
‘Talut’ Arlen frowned seriously. ‘Leave them be.’
‘Alright fine’ Talut sighed turning his back on both of them. ‘Now what was it you wanted?’
‘Well…’
‘Before you tell me’ Talut interrupted Arlen, ‘first let me show you the market. It is a most splendid place indeed. You're not in a rush, are you? Good’ he answered quickly when he saw Arlen hesitate. ‘Then come and let me show you all, this wonderful place.’

‘I’m telling you’ Talut was saying, leading the way through the crowd as they explored the market, ‘you can buy anything here. From food….to demons…..to diseases….’
‘Why would anyone want to buy a disease?’ Annabel asked with disgust, wrinkling her nose.
‘Why would anyone want to buy a poison?’ he countered.
She fell silent.

‘There are all sorts of folk who come here’ Talut explained. ‘They come from far and wide, all to be in this one place, this market that is held once every three months only.’
‘I guess we came at the right time then’ Shawn said meekly.
‘You did indeed’ Talut beamed back at him. ‘This place exists for only eight days before the merchants move on. People try to make the most of it.’
They came across a curious thing on their way through the market. In a section of street that widened out into a small square, they saw a creature. It was large enough to be able to potentially ride, with enormous leathery wings, a long whip-like tail and the head of a bull, with massive horns pointed forwards and downwards.
‘What is that thing?’ Shawn asked.
‘It’s got many different names in many different languages’ Talut answered, ‘and many in the same language. Most people just call it a flying cow.’
‘Flying cow?’ Annabel repeated sceptically. ‘That’s a silly name.’
‘It’s just a nickname that stuck’ Talut shrugged happily.
The creature was heavily chained where it stood, crouching down low with wings bound and eyes dull. Its colour was the most beautiful black and vivid red stripped, with a shaggy black mane running down the nape of its neck.
It didn’t resist the chains, or try to free itself from them, instead swayed on the spot where it was, slowly back and forth.
‘What's wrong with it?’ Arlen asked.
‘Oh. It’s been drugged’ Talut answered casually. ‘You can’t expect to bring a thing like that to a place like this without taking such measures’ he waved his arms away at the creature dismissively before moving on.
‘Who would someone buy something like that?’ Shawn asked. ‘What possible use could you have for it?’
‘My dear boy’ Talut chuckled back at him. ‘You lack imagination. That thing is worth more gold than you’ll ever see in your life. It’s a status symbol, for only the very richest few who exist in this world. They are very rare indeed. You’re lucky to even see one today. No doubt there are a few very rich folk wandering around here today. Someone might even buy it.’
‘It makes me sad’ Annabel mumbled, ‘to see such a beautiful creature chained up and treated like that. It should be flying free in the skies.’
‘You’ll get over it’ Talut smirked at her. ‘And it can’t actually fly. The wings are only for display. It’s like I said’ he beamed, ‘you can buy *anything* here. Even children.’
They all slowed to a stop, Annabel accidentally walked into Shawn who had stopped in front of her.
‘Sorry’ she stumbled back. ‘Did you say children?’ she asked Talut speaking to him.
‘Take a look’ Talut pointed.
He indicated further down the crowded street, where there stood a woman with three small children, one she held by the wrist, the other two hid behind her timidly.
‘Wait here a minute’ Talut said to them. ‘The stall I'm looking for is just over there’ he pointed. ‘I’ll be right back.’
He left their side. Arlen watched Talut as he headed to a tiny and unremarkable looking stall a short distance away.

The three of them waited in the middle of the street, the other people passing by them, Arlen turned his sights back upon the woman with the children. She noticed his attention and moved towards him.
'I have some fine children here if you're interested' she said to them. 'They can work around the house or learn any trade you teach them. They're still young' she said. 'You can make them what you want.'
The children were aged between five and seven; the middle child was a girl.
'Why are you selling your own children?' Shawn asked her repulsed.
'I can't afford to keep them anymore' the woman said promptly. 'The husband's gone and wants nothing to do with them, and what I work barely affords food for me alone.'
'How much are they?' Arlen asked.
'A thousand marks each' the woman replied.
'Seems a bit expensive' Arlen noted. 'How much is that in crowns?'
'You're a foreigner?'
'Wasn't that obvious?'
Arlen then spotted Talut coming back towards them.
'I'm not buying them' Arlen said as he watched Talut coming closer.
The woman scowled at him as she moved off, dragging the children with her.
'What was *that* all about?' Shawn sneered in disgust. 'This place is not that far from our own home and yet it is so different.'
Talut returned to their side.
'I'm back' he declared. 'Now should we get something to eat?'
'What did you buy?' Annabel asked him.
'Medicines for my dear sweet mother, and by god does she need it. We'll see how well they work. 'Now come on' he said briskly to them, 'I'll show you a nice place to eat.' He led them way. As they went, he asked them briefly, 'you weren't thinking of buying those children, were you?'

'Now this is the place to be' Taut said to them a short while later as the four of them sat around a tiny table with four tiny bowls of food placed before each of them. 'What do you think of the food? It's pretty good isn't it?'
'It's better than it looks' Annabel told him, poking the grey stuff mixed with green stuff that sat at the bottom of the bowl, with the tiny headed long handled spoon they had been given.
'It's a fish' Talut informed them. 'A special kind of spiky fish that lives in deep waters in rocky places, it's very hard to catch, a real delicacy.'
'And what's the other stuff mixed with it?' Annabel asked.
'Seaweed.'
'I could have guessed' she said. 'The green was a bit of a giveaway.'
'Oh no' Talut corrected. 'The grey is the seaweed; the green is the fish.'
'Is there anything else I can get for you?' a passing servant bowed to them.
'No thank you Fitz' Talut beamed. 'Wait. I should have asked you if you wanted anything else' he spoke to the others. 'Do you guys want anything else?'
'I think we're fine' Shawn replied, struggling to get his green sloppy fish on his tiny headed spoon.

‘I think we’re fine’ Talut relayed the message to the servant, who bowed again and moved on.
‘Dammit why are these spoons so small?’
‘To make you savour the food’ Talut told him. ‘It’s a very rich dish. You just don’t realise how rich until after. If you were to be given a larger spoon, it would make you quite sick indeed. Remember’ he said wagging a finger at them, ‘eat it slowly.’
‘Isn't this place expensive?’ Shawn asked pushing his bowl away, having had his fill.
‘It is.’
‘Does that mean we owe you money?’
‘Nope.’ Talut leant forward slyly, speaking to Shawn in a seductive whisper. ‘I know people’ he said simply, before leaning back and falling silent, with no further explanation. ‘Now what did you want to speak to me about?’ he asked Arlen in a regular tone.
‘Well’ Arlen spoke slowly. ‘Where do I begin?’ He thought for a moment. ‘My daughter is missing. I want you to help me find her.’
Shawn turned to him. ‘*Your* daughter?’
Arlen shot him a warning glare.
‘Ah yes’ Talut said knowingly. ‘Amaia. The girl with two fathers. She was taken by your king twelve years ago wasn’t she? I thought you had found her.’
‘I lost her again’ Arlen replied shortly.
‘Well’ Talut sighed, reaching forwards to his glass of water and drinking deeply before placing it carefully back down. ‘That is unfortunate.’ He ate several of the small savoury biscuits sitting at the centre of the table before addressing Arlen again. ‘And what do you need *my* help for?’
‘I…’ Arlen began, dropping his eyes in thought before continuing. ‘I want you to kill the king.’
Annabel stiffened at that, and Shawn frowned.
‘Kill a king?’ Talut repeated. ‘That is no small task. I presume you presume that the Weather Makers will stop being kidnapped once the king is…should we say…*gone*?’
‘That is what I presume’ Arlen concluded. ‘So. Can you help?’
‘No.’
‘Why not?’
‘I am bound to these lands’ Talut answered vaguely. ‘I cannot leave my home.’
Shawn who was listening silently narrowed his eyes, glancing from one to the other.
‘I cannot help you’ Talut repeated. ‘But……I can take you to someone who may be able to help you instead.’
‘Who?’ Arlen asked.
‘The royal family.’
‘Why would the royal family help us?’ Shawn voiced.
‘I am a busy man’ Talut murmured to him, ‘a man with many skills who knows a lot of people. Even royalty. Some of the people I know even owe me favours.’
‘And you would use one of those favours to help me?’
‘Arlen’ Talut said sounding dejected. ‘You wound me. Haven’t the two of us been friends long enough?’
‘Are you serious about this?’ Arlen asked.

‘Yes’ Talut nodded. ‘But first, before anything else I must return home. I need to give these to my mother’ he said, patting the pocket where lay the medicines he had just bought. ‘By god does she need them.’

‘Fuck off and die you bitch-pig son of a whore!’
‘Now mother’ Talut frowned affectionately down at her. ‘That’s no way to speak to your son now is it?’
‘Burn in a pit of fire you demon-scum!’
Talut sighed in exasperation.
‘I love you too mother’ he said wearily.
Talut marched past her and into the house, handing the medicine to one of the servants. ‘I wish you the best of luck with these’ he told Eilliah.
‘I’ll try to mix it with her food’ the young lady told him, ‘and see if she doesn’t notice.’
Talut nodded at this idea. ‘Just…’ he began, ‘don’t hang around too long when you give it to her……if she suspects there is something in it……well…’ he broke off. ‘Just don’t hang around for too long. Eh?’
‘Understood’ Eilliah nodded.
She took the medicine and retreated to another room.
‘Now’ Talut said clapping his hands together and speaking to the others now. ‘Where were we?’
‘Amaia?’ Arlen prompted.
‘Oh yes.’
‘What's wrong with her?’ Shawn asked him, glancing about the room around them which was small and cosy.
‘What?’
‘Your mother. Why is she like that?’
‘Oh’ Talut bowed his head. ‘It’s a very sad thing that happened.’ He moved over towards the mantelpiece as he spoke, lifting one of the pictures that rested upon it. ‘She only used to be this way’ he said to the picture, ‘in the last few years. Before that…. she was happy, used to smile…. she used to make me oat cakes….and orange buns…. they were good…. those were the days.’
‘What happened?’ Annabel asked carefully.
‘Her mind changed’ Talut replied. ‘I can’t explain it. I don’t understand it myself. Despite all my knowledge and skills…. even I cannot help her.’ He sighed deeply. ‘All I can do now’ he said, ‘is to accept her the way that she is, and care for her until she dies.’ He looked down at the picture. ‘I do this’ he said, ‘because I remember how she used to be, and I remember how well she looked after me when I was young and growing.’ He showed them the picture he held. It was a portrait of a woman, old but still pretty, and healthy with colour in her cheeks. She was smiling. ‘This was her before she changed’ Talut told them.’
‘She looks completely different’ Arlen said.
‘Yes’ Talut replied sadly. ‘She was happy back then, friendly. Not the ghost she is now. I've spoken to so many people about her condition, and no one can help me. All I can do now is buy medicines to suppress the symptoms and make her more…. manageable.’

He placed the picture back on the mantelpiece and turned to speak to them again. 'Now' he said in a happier tone, 'the royal family….'
'You really think they will help us?'
'It's like I said before' Talut replied to Shawn. 'Favours.'
'So, when do we see them?' Annabel asked him, seated at the table. 'Will we go to the royal palace?'
'No' Talut laughed shaking his head. 'The princess does not like her own home all that much I'm afraid. She tries her best to spend as little time there as possible. No' he said again. 'We will find her somewhere else. After nightfall, she will be deep within the city.' He smirked. 'I will find her' he reassured them. 'Don't you worry. Now in the meantime' he said, 'would anyone like some gin to pass the time?'

That evening under the cover of darkness, Talut led them back into the city, through the streets which mere hours ago were brimming with busy folk, but were now deserted.
'I don't mean to doubt you' Annabel began tentatively, 'but are you sure we're heading to the right place?'
'Of course,' Talut sang back confidently as he marched ahead of them. 'If anyone knows the princess……. I know where she is' he finished.
They came off the main street, heading now into narrower side-alleys. They walked for some time, zigzagging back and forth along the path, Annabel quickly losing track in her mind of which direction they were heading.
'Are you sure we're not lost?' Annabel asked him after a time.
'Of course we're not lost' Talut scoffed. 'I know this entire city as well as I do my own home, every nook, every cranny…'
They came to an alleyway that was so narrow, a normal sized person was only just about able to walk it, though they were not even able to lift their arms up to the side. They walked in single file through this alley, one after the other.
'Are we nearly there yet?' Annabel asked Talut who walked ahead of her.
He paused only to glance back, a few seconds later slowing before a small door. 'It's through here' he said cheerily.
'I don't like this' Annabel replied instantly.
'I don't know what you're so afraid of' Talut said turning to the door.
'I'm not afraid' Annabel said indignantly.
'Yes, you are' Talut replied. 'I can tell.'
He opened the small door which swung inwards, having to duck low to fit through it.
'Come on' Talut encouraged, his voice echoing back to her. 'It's perfectly safe, look I even went first.'
Annabel glanced at Shawn who stood behind her, and to Arlen who stood behind him.
'Its fine' Arlen said to her from the back. 'I trust him.'
Annabel faced to the door again, and entered, following after Talut and ducking to fit through. Shawn and Arlen followed after her.
The room inside was small and completely empty, but there was enough space for all of them to stand comfortably.

Arlen closed the small door after him, and Talut led the way through to the only other door in the dark and silent room. He opened this door and noise suddenly filled their ears. The room beyond was large and brightly lit and filled with people cheering and shouting to one another. They stood on a balcony of some sorts, looking over at a pit below them.

'There are many entrances to this place' Talut explained to them, raising his voice so that he could be heard. 'I prefer the more secretive ones. Come now Annabel' he said to her, 'you can relax now.'

'What is this place?' Shawn asked loudly.

Talut glanced towards him, flashing a grin. 'Fighting pits.'

The four of them approached the rails where there was a small gap for them to stand, seeing below them a pit sunk into the earth where two men fought viciously. Bare-chested, they were both thickset and heavy men, one was bald with tattoos all over his body, the other bearded with long dark dreadlocks. They fought with bare fists in the most brutal and barbaric of ways, resorting to clawing with their nails at each other, and ripping each other with their teeth at every chance. The sand around them was dark and already heavily stained with blood from fights that had ended previously that evening.

Annabel winced in distaste as she watched the spectacle, the crowd of men on the balcony around them cheered and hollered as the fighters below them tore at each other with primal rage. Annabel glanced up.

'What are they doing?' Annabel asked Talut, seeing a small group of men a short distance away. They seemed to be arguing, or haggling, or debating, and money was being passed between several of them.

'They're taking bets' Talut answered loudly back. 'These folks will bet on anything that involves blood and pain and violence.'

'That's horrid.'

'Not to these people' Talut winked at her.

'Have you taken bets before?' Shawn asked him.

'Taken bets?!' Talut echoed, incredulous. 'I've taken part in the fights themselves, that's how I got this scar' he said pulling his shirt down, revealing a grotesque scar that ran across his shoulder and chest.

Arlen leant over the railing slightly, watching the fight below him. He saw as one man head-butted the other, knocking him onto his back and lunging for him. They wrestled on the ground for a short time, before one man gained the advantage, climbing on top of the other and grasping his head, forcing his thumbs through the man's eyes. The man on the ground began to scream.

Arlen watched as the man in the pit crushed the head of the other man with his bare hands, killing him instantly.

He turned away as the dead man was strung up by his feet and hung at the edge of the pit, joining the many other hanging corpses that circled the fights. The bodies of the previous fighters that had entered the pits that night, the ones that had not survived. The winning man thrust his fists into the air to the sounds of cheering, striding out of the pit through the iron gates.

Arlen spoke to Talut. 'Where is the princess we seek?' he asked.

Talut glanced up to the balcony opposite them. Within the crowd of men baying for blood, they saw a woman dressed all in black. Like those around her she was leaning over the railing, screaming and shouting at the fighters below, calling out for more.
'And I thought I was the only woman here' Annabel said dryly. 'Never mind.'
'*That*...is the princess?' Shawn asked incredulous.
'It is' Talut nodded. 'Why? Is she not as you were expecting?' his eyes glinted as he spoke.
'Come' Talut said, moving away from the railings as two new fighters entered the pits below them. 'Let's introduce ourselves, shall we?'
The princess was a tall and slender woman who dressed more like a man, with black trousers, worn and filthy travelling boots and a long black trench coat. Her hair, black like the clothes she wore, was short and scruffy, as if she had cut it off herself.
Talut approached her and spoke to her briefly. The princess did not look at him, but leant towards him as he spoke directly into her ear, she waited silently as he told her what he needed to say.
The princess glanced up at last, seeing the others waiting behind Talut.
'I will be very glad to receive them' she spoke flatly. 'You may bring them to the palace tomorrow at midday.'
Talut bowed and left.
'Was that it?' Shawn asked him as they left the place the way they had come in, stepping out into the moonlight and the open still air again. The silence felt good.
'Yes' Talut answered shortly. 'Now she knows we want to see her. She will be waiting for us tomorrow at the palace.'

They returned to Talut's home and each was given their own room to sleep.
'Goodnight' Shawn whispered to Annabel when they were alone. 'I'll see you in the morning.'
She grabbed his wrist as he made to leave.
'Wait' she whispered in the dark. 'Don't leave me.'
He turned back to her.
'This house is so strange' she said to him. 'I don't think I could fall asleep on my own.' She lifted her eyes to his. 'Could you stay with me tonight? And keep me warm?'
She let go of him, letting her hand fall back to her side as she waited for an answer.
'Please?'
He smiled at her, brushing her long black hair back and tucking it behind her ear.
'Of course' he whispered to her.
They moved over to the bed and Annabel sat down, withdrawing beneath the sheets and shuffling back as Shawn climbed in beside her.
Annabel snuggled into him, resting her cheek against his shoulder.
'This is nice' she said to him.
'Yeah' Shawn whispered. 'It is.'
She breathed a heavy sigh, running her hand over his bare chest and closing her eyes.
'Anna?' Shawn spoke quietly after a while. But she was fast asleep.
Shawn sighed deeply, holding her to him.

‘Sweet dreams’ he said to her, turning to kiss her forehead, before relaxing his body, and giving himself up to sleep.

The next morning, all four of them rode to the palace, with Talut leading the way, mounted upon a bronze and white stripped stallion, a strange creature, with bright blue eyes.
‘I simply love these lands’ Talut was saying, throwing his arms out as they rode. ‘The air is always so pure, and the mountains so beautiful. Perhaps one day when you are not so busy, you should wander these wilds, where there are many wonderful things to see. You know’ he said, glancing back at Annabel and Shawn, ‘if I were to ever get married, it would be here.’
They reached the palace a few hours later. It was a grand building, striking and beautiful with many tall spires. A great path of pale stone was built for many miles, leading all the way to the entrance of the building. The palace itself when they reached it at last, was surrounded by lush and thriving gardens, overflowing with fruit and flowers and bees and birds.
When they came to the entrance of the palace and dismounted their horses, they found the princess already waiting for them at the top of the steps. Several stable hands stepped forwards to take their horses as she spoke to them.
‘Follow me’ she said promptly before marching away.
They picked up their pace to keep up with her stride as the large double doors were held open for them by the palace guards. She led them through the grand entrance hall, made of pale and shining stone, and through an archway that led to a long corridor. Annabel took in their surroundings as they went. The columns that held up the ceiling were beautifully carved in depictions of vines and twisting roots set at eye-level. Intricately detailed and painstakingly sculpted were delicate flowers carved from the very stone itself. Each petal was individually chiselled, and painted in glossy coats of bright colours to protect it. Around some of these columns, grew actual plants and flowers that overflowed from the garden nearby, some of which were creeping into the building and clinging to the edges of the corridor they walked.
‘Through here’ the princess spoke when they reached the end of the corridor, holding a door open for them to enter the next room. ‘After you.’
The four of them filed in, Talut moving first and the rest following after him. They entered a room, which was plain in comparison to the stunning hall they had just left. The walls were smooth with no depictions, with one large oval window set in the wall at the back of the room, overlooking a garden that grew at a lower level. The view through the window was far more interesting than what was inside the room itself, where there were only several chairs surrounding a plain oval table. Sitting at the table, were two figures, one male, one female. They were finely dressed and mature in age. It was clear at a glance as the princess entered the room after them, closing the door behind her, that these were her parents, the king and queen. They shared the same physical features, even though they presented themselves quiet differently. The royal parents looked ‘normal’, while their daughter looked like she had been raised on the streets in violence and in turmoil.
‘Please sit down’ the princess spoke shortly, and the others obeyed. She herself remained standing, while her parents looked on silently. ‘Now’ she began. ‘I believe you wish to ask something of me.’
‘Yes’ Talut said briskly. ‘These fine folks here’ he indicated Arlen, Shawn and Annabel, ‘seek to ask you favour.’

‘I owe them no favour’ the princess said raising an eyebrow at them and sneering slightly. ‘Why did you come before me with this?’
‘Arlen here’ Talut went on, ‘is a good friend of mine.’
‘That means nothing to me’ the princess continued. ‘You could be sharing the same bed and that would make no difference to me.’
‘As I understand it’ Talut went on, ‘you owe *me* a favour. And for the record’ he added hastily glancing towards Arlen, ‘we do *not* share the same bed.’
‘So, you would use your one favour we owe you’ the princess spoke slowly, ‘to help these people?’
‘Yes’ Talut nodded once.
‘Very well’ the princess crossed her arms. ‘I agree to this.’ She addressed Arlen then. ‘What aid do you wish of me?’
‘We need an army’ Arlen told the princess.
‘For what purpose?’
‘To fight against the king and kill him.’
‘Why do you want this?’
‘Because…’ Arlen bit his lip in thought. ‘Because…’
‘The princess is familiar with the Weather Makers’ Talut told him. ‘You can tell her.’
Arlen glanced at Talut, before speaking again.
‘My daughter is a Weather Maker’ Arlen began. ‘She has been…kidnapped by the king.’
The princess cocked her head curiously as she listened.
‘The king is a dangerous man’ Arlen went on, ‘my daughter is not the only one who has been taken. There have been many before her, and will be many more to come…unless something is done.’
‘Why does he take the Weather Makers then?’ the princess asked.
The royal parents, the king and queen listened silently.
‘The prince’ Arlen said, ‘has told us that he kidnaps them, believing they have the power to save his wife.’
‘Save?’
‘She is…in a coma’ Arlen told her. ‘Or so the prince tells us.’
‘And the prince tells you that the Weather Makers can save her?’
‘That’s what the king believes’ Arlen mumbled.
‘And you trust the prince?’
‘No.’
‘Then why do know him?’
‘He is helping us.’
‘Why?’
‘He has his reasons.’
The princess shared a glance with her parents. Something passed between them, and the princess turned back to Arlen.
‘Who are these who accompany you?’ the princess asked Arlen.
‘This is Shawn’ Arlen explained. ‘He is my nephew.’
‘And the lady?’
Annabel raised her head.

‘This is Annabel’ Arlen said after a pause.
‘Why is *she* here?’ the princess asked.
‘For her safety.’
‘Safety?’ the princess said to Arlen.
‘She is a Weather Maker also.’
The princess’ eyes instantly lit up.
‘Is she?’ she spoke slowly.
The edge of her lip curled in a smile and her cheek twitched.
‘I would very much like to see your powers’ she said to Annabel.
Annabel hesitated. Arlen glanced to Talut, whose eyes flickered to his. There was something strange about his demeanour then.
Arlen realised suddenly with a twinge in his stomach what it was.
Uncertainty.
‘I don’t know if this is such a good idea’ Shawn spoke up as Annabel stood to obey.
Nearby Talut clenched his jaw.
‘Nonsense’ the princess scoffed. ‘If you have powers, I want to see it, or else I might not be so willing to offer you my support.’
Annabel and Shawn exchanged a hesitant look.
Shawn did not try to stop her as Annabel took a deep breath, turning to face the window at the back of the room, beyond which was the garden.
The others within the room all diverted their attention towards the glass then, as Annabel performed her magic.
Ivy grew just beyond the window, before their very eyes it crept upon the glass, blotting out the light until the room within was cast into shadow.
‘Remarkable’ the princess breathed. ‘A Weather Maker brought to me, before my very feet.’
The princess then strode to the door, shouting out a command in a foreign tongue. Instantly, two guards that had been stationed outside the room marched in. They descended upon Amaia, each grabbing her by an arm and dragging her. She screamed, trying in vain to free herself. Shawn instantly rose to his feet, grabbing one of the guards in an attempt to stop them. In one swift move the guard drew forth a sword, pressing the tip into Shawn’s belly.
Shawn raised his hands in submission, stepping back as the other guard dragged Annabel away. Unarmed, Shawn was powerless to protect her.
‘Where are you taking her?!’ Shawn demanded in a wavering voice.
‘That is none of your concern’ the princess answered curtly as the guard sheathed his sword, straightening and marching out of the room after the other guard that held Annabel.
She called out to him, and he called out to her, standing there helpless and lost.
‘Anna!’ he cried.
‘Don’t try to use your power!’ the princess ordered her as the guard closed the door behind him. ‘Do so and I will make you regret it.’
They were gone from sight now, and silence filled the room. At least for a short time.
‘What are you doing?!’ Shawn rounded on the princess. ‘Where are you taking her?’
‘Watch your tongue or I will cut it out’ the princess replied, leaning forward with her hands rested upon the table. Nearby the royal parents sat ever silent, and on the other side of the table, Talut and Arlen had not moved.

‘This is your fault’ Shawn spat at Talut. ‘You let this happen!’
‘Calm yourself’ Talut replied levelly back. ‘I’d hate for you to be told again.’
‘Talut’ Arlen spoke calmly. ‘What's going on here?’
‘I owe you one favour’ the princess said straightening again. ‘You have a decision. Receive an army and let us have the girl, or leave here as you entered.’
‘And let her suffer what fate?’ Shawn demanded.
‘That is not for you to know’ the princess glowered.
‘What will you do with her?’
‘Your persistence annoys me’ the princess said to Shawn, her upper lip curling in a snarl. ‘If you insist on knowing, then I will tell you *something*.’
She cupped her hands before her. Within her palm sparks formed, like little dancing fireflies, they crackled, quivering in the air briefly before fading away into nothing.
‘I have the powers of a Weather Maker, but I was not born this way. Your Annabel can help me in ways you couldn’t even imagine.’
‘If you were not born that way’ Arlen voiced. ‘Then how did you….?’
Talut looked on silently. The princess glanced behind her, to a figure the others had not noticed before. It was a mysterious figure, dressed all in black with black gloves, and a bird’s mask which covered the face. The figure stood there silent like a spectre, and did not move.
‘I give you until tomorrow to make your decision’ the princess said straightening. ‘I have much to do. Excuse me.’
She strode out of the room briskly, shortly followed by the mysterious masked figure. The figure paused for a moment, staring at them, as if deeply intrigued, before moving on. After them, the royal parents, the king and queen went, silent as they had been.
‘What have you done?’ Shawn spat at Talut the instant they were alone.
‘Relax’ Talut said casually. ‘Everything’s fine. God you're so impulsive, and overemotional. That will get you in trouble one of these days.’
Shawn grabbed him by the arms suddenly, shoulders hunched and muscles tense.
‘Let go boy’ Talut said dangerously back at him.
Shawn didn’t move; the two glared at each other unblinking. Shawn lowered his head, but did not break eye contact; his body began to shake in anger.
‘I could kill you in one move boy’ Talut growled. ‘If you want your girlfriend to see you again, I suggest you let go.’
‘Shawn’ Arlen spoke up firmly. ‘Let him go.’
Shawn gritted his teeth in fury, lifting his hands slowly and deliberately off Talut’s shoulders and stepping back. He stormed off across the room to stand by the window, glaring out through the ivy at the trees below in silence, anger bubbling away inside him.
Behind him Talut blinked several times before turning casually to Arlen. ‘Do you want to pick a fight with me too?’ he asked Arlen.
‘I'm not here to fight with you’ Arlen replied. ‘I didn’t come all this way for something so unproductive, my friend. And besides’ he added, ‘you would only win.’
Talut bowed his head.
‘But Shawn is right. What *have* you done? This wasn’t supposed to happen.’
‘The princess by law owns all Weather Makers in this land. They are hers by right.’

‘Putting aside the fact it’s wrong for one person to own another’ Arlen spoke, ‘I find it disgraceful that you would allow this to happen.’
‘No’ Talut said. ‘You didn’t tell me what she was. I could have prevented this if I knew. Speaking of which, if Annabel is really that important to you, why did you bring her all the way here?’
‘She wasn’t safe at home’ Arlen replied. ‘But you already know that. It’s the same for all Weather Makers.’
‘In any case’ Talut said crossing his arms, ‘she is safe until you decide how to use the one favour I own the princess. Set Annabel free, or accept her army and travel back home to kill your king and save all Weather Makers there, including Amaia.’
Arlen hesitated.
‘No’ Shawn spoke up turning to him. ‘You cannot even consider…. we *have* to free Annabel.’
‘But’ Talut spoke almost teasingly, ‘if you do that you lose the help you could offer Amaia.’
‘Is this a game to you?’ Shawn growled. Talut could see the hate and raw fury in him.
Talut sighed, closing his eyes.
‘Fine. I see how much she means to you. I do not wish to torture you further.’ He straightened. ‘I will tell the princess that you wish to free Annabel.’
‘Do it now’ Shawn demanded.
‘Can’t’ Talut answered shortly. ‘The princess is gone already.’
‘Where?’
‘I don’t know’ Talut said tiredly. ‘She hates the palace; she makes much effort to spend as little time here as possible. She’s not bound here. We will receive another audience with her tomorrow morning.’
‘But Annabel….’
‘Will be fine in the meantime’ Talut reassured firmly. ‘We’ll stay here overnight until we can see the princess again. I’ll find a servant. There’s bound to be loads of spare rooms here in this vast palace.’

That night, Shawn did not sleep at all, and the hours and minutes dragged on agonizingly slowly, until at long last the morning came and they stood before the princess once again.
‘Well what's your decision?’
‘Set Annabel free’ Shawn demanded.
‘Really?’ the queen turned to him. ‘You would choose this girl over receiving an army? You must think the world of her.’ Shawn’s expression darkened over her casual tone. ‘Well…if she really means that much to you, it’s not right for me to keep her.’ She clicked her fingers at a nearby guard who swiftly left the room.
A short time later he returned, with Annabel beside him.
‘Anna!’ Shawn rushed up to her, holding her face in his hands. ‘Are you alright? They didn’t hurt you, did they?’
‘I'm fine’ Annabel told him hastily, smiling at him and holding him back.
‘We wouldn’t do anything to her until it was decided she was fully ours’ the princess explained. ‘I assure you she was well looked after. Ask her if you don’t believe me.’
‘Were you?’

‘Yes Shawn. Don’t worry’ Annabel chuckled lightly at him. ‘I was very well looked after. The food was good, the bed was soft, they treated me well…there was even entertainment.’
‘What?’
‘Don’t worry’ Annabel smiled patting his arms. ‘I'm fine, I told you. Everything’s alright.’
Shawn embraced her then, holding her close.
‘Thank the gods’ he whispered in her ear as he held her tightly. ‘I was so scared…’

One night, when they were back at Talut’s home, Arlen wandered through the quiet house alone, unable to sleep. He found the old lady sitting in one of the chairs downstairs.
He watched her for a moment, deep in thought. His attention drifted towards the mantelpiece where there was the picture of herself in younger and better days. Beside this painted picture was another that caught his attention. It was a painting of herself, with a man that must have been her husband. They were both leaning into each other, smiling widely.
Arlen took the picture, slowly lifting it from the mantelpiece. He approached the old lady with it.
She looked up at him, and began to snarl, on the verge of spouting a stream of vile words at him. Arlen held the picture out for her to see before she could do so.
The old lady hesitated. She stared at the picture, and then a gentle smile crossed her face. When she smiled her whole demeanour changed, and she was beautiful once again.
She took the picture from him gently, gazing down at it with tears in her eyes.
‘My loving husband’ she sighed. ‘You were the heaven and the earth to me.’
Still smiling she closed her eyes, falling back into her chair and becoming still, clutching the photo to her chest.
‘It looks like you’ve made my mother very happy’ came a voice.
Arlen saw Talut who stood leaning against the doorframe with his arms folded.
‘It was nothing’ Arlen said. ‘Really.’
‘Still’ Talut grinned. ‘It looks like I owe you a favour.’
‘Now that you mention it…’ Arlen began.
‘No’ Talut interrupted quickly. ‘I cannot leave these lands’ he said. ‘I will not.’

Arlen went to his room later to think. He thought long and hard about his next decision before asking Shawn and Annabel to meet with him.
‘Ok listen’ Arlen said to them. ‘I have a plan. We came all this way and we can’t leave empty handed…so I've been doing some thinking.’
‘You really think we can convince him to help us?’ Shawn asked him doubtfully.
‘Convince’ Arlen spoke reluctantly, ‘isn’t the word I would use.’
‘You want to force him to help us?’ Annabel straightened. ‘But how?’
‘Well’ Arlen began slowly. ‘I've been doing some thinking. Like I said, we’ve come all this way, and I can’t…. *won’t*...leave empty handed.’
‘I don’t like where this is going’ Shawn told him.
‘I have a plan’ Arlen continued as if Shawn hadn’t spoken. ‘I need your help to do this. But don’t worry’ he added casually, ‘only I will get the blame for this.’
‘I *really* don’t like where this is going’ Shawn said flatly.

‘My plan’ Arlen went on, ‘is to poison Talut, and hold the antidote for ransom until he does for us what we want.’
‘I don’t like it either’ Annabel added.
‘It’s the only way.’
‘Isn't this man dangerous?’ Annabel frowned at him. ‘Really dangerous? Shawn and I don’t know anything about him, but you do.’
‘Yes’ Arlen agreed reluctantly. ‘I know him very well, which is how I know that he will only suspect me of this, and not either of you.’
‘Arlen’ Shawn said. ‘I really *really* don’t like this.’
‘You won’t help me? For Amaia?’
Shawn glanced towards Annabel.
‘Shawn’ Arlen said firmly. ‘I swear by the seven gods and on my life, that neither you nor Annabel will be put in danger by helping me.’
‘You're sure he won’t hold us guilty?’ Shawn asked him. ‘You're sure we can get away with this if we try?’
‘I assure you he won’t suspect a thing’ Arlen told him. ‘He trusts me more than anyone else in the world. Save for one person.’
‘Who?’
‘His son.’
‘And you would throw that away?’ Shawn raised an eyebrow sceptically.
‘For Amaia’ Arlen whispered. ‘I would do *anything*.’
‘So, if we poison him and hold the antidote’ Annabel spoke up, ‘he will agree to help us.’
‘No’ Arlen said. ‘He does not care about his own life enough to be controlled like that. Which is why we’re going to poison his son also.’
‘You cannot be fucking serious?’ Shawn spat at him. ‘What kind of people do you think we are?’
‘Keep your voice down’ Arlen hissed.
‘How old is his son?’ Annabel asked.
‘Seven.’
‘Gods above’ Shawn stepped back, hand going to his forehead and brushing his blonde hair back. ‘What is he going to do when he finds out?’
‘Nothing’ Arlen said. ‘Until he gets his antidote.’
‘And then?’
‘He will kill me.’
‘Arlen…’
‘Listen to me Shawn’ Arlen said seriously. ‘Neither Talut nor his son will be in danger. They *will* both get the antidote, because Talut will not refuse to help us if his son is put in danger. The king will die, no long will Weather Makers be kidnapped…. who knows what happens to them once the king has them…. but I bet it’s not good. And Amaia…’ Arlen drew a shuddering breath, balling his fists. ‘Shawn’ Arlen said, a darkness falling over him. ‘We *have* to do this. The only one who will suffer for this is me.’ He looked Shawn in the eye, staring deeply into him. ‘I *have* to do this’ Arlen told him. ‘For Amaia.’
‘But Arlen’ Shawn said, looking at him differently now. ‘Will he really try to kill you?’

‘Yes’ Arlen said firmly. ‘I've known him for a very long time. I know what he’s like. He will try to kill me’ he drew a deep breath, ‘and he will most likely make me suffer before I die. But he *will* try to kill me, and he *will* succeed. I am no match for him, and I never will be.’
‘But Arlen…’
‘Shawn listen to me’ Arlen hissed in a low voice, rounding on him and grabbing him by his shoulders, shaking him as he spoke. ‘I would do *anything* for Amaia. *Anything*. The fact that I believe she might still be alive is the only reason I am standing here. That day I lost Ramana…’ he let go of him, stepping away. ‘The only thing that kept me sane…. kept me from taking my own life…or being driven mad by grief, was the fact that Amaia’s body was never found…. She’s out there somewhere Shawn. She could be scared, in pain…suffering…I *have* find her. Don’t you understand? She’s the only reason I wish to live at all now.’
But Arlen….’ Shawn mumbled uncertainly. ‘You will die…’
‘Then I will die a happy death, knowing that I did all I could to find Amaia.’
‘Arlen…’
‘Shawn…she is the only thing that matters to me in this world. I would willingly suffer the worst tortures everyday if it meant that she would be found, alive and well. She’s my only reason for living…’ he turned his back on them so they would not see the tears in his eyes.
I miss her he thought in his head, *gods I miss her so much…*
‘You have to help me…’ he whispered to them. ‘Please…’
Shawn stared at his back for a moment before answering.
‘Do you promise me that Annabel will be safe if we do this?’
‘Yes’ Arlen said without pause. ‘And if not, you can kill me yourself. I won’t try to stop you.’
Shawn exchanged a glance with Annabel, who gave him a nod.
‘Alright’ Shawn said reluctantly. ‘I can’t believe I'm agreeing to do this, especially to a boy so young, but I will do it.’
‘Thank you’ Arlen whispered, not turning back to them. ‘Now please leave. I wish to be alone. I will speak to you both again in the morning about what we need to do.’
He waited for the sound of the door to close and footsteps to recede down the corridor, before falling to his knees and sobbing into his hands.
Please…. He prayed to the gods in his head. *Please let her still be alive. Amaia…I will find you if it kills me……I will find you if it’s the last thing I ever do.*

The next morning, Arlen woke long before anyone else, even before Talut. He left and wandered alone, along the streets of the city that was built on the doorstep of the home. All around him the market was already bustling, the merchants rising early to make the most of their business, filling the air with their calls as they shouted out to potential customers.
When Arlen did return hours later, he was accompanied by three young children.
‘Arlen’ Shawn began in surprise. ‘I didn’t realise you had that much money.’
‘I managed to convince their mother to give them up for nothing’ Arlen explained, glancing back at the two brothers and one sister. ‘It would after all, cost to keep them right?’ he said. ‘And who knows what might happen to them if I didn’t take them?’
‘Noble’ Shawn replied, ‘but what are *we* going to do with them?’

‘I think it was a good thing that you did’ Annabel said kneeling before the children and smiling. ‘It’s alright little ones’ she said to them. ‘You're safe with us.’
‘They could always work around the house’ Talut spoke glancing down at them, ‘or help care for the animals we have out back.’
‘Talut’ Arlen said. ‘There is something I must do with Shawn and Annabel. We’ll be gone for a while. Will we be welcome back here when we return?’
‘Of course, my old friend’ Talut beamed back without the slightest suspicion. ‘You are always welcome in my home.’
‘And can these children stay with you for a short while? I’ll collect them when I return. I promise.’
‘Of course,’ Talut nodded. ‘Goodbye now, and have fun. Wherever you're going.’
Arlen walked away with a strong feeling of guilt and a heavy heart.
‘So where are we going?’ Annabel asked him as the three of them walked together back through the market in the city.
‘We need ingredients to make this poison’ Arlen spoke in a mutter back to her in case anyone was listening. ‘Some I need to buy; others we need to find ourselves.’
They followed Arlen about the market that day as they bought a variety of strange substances and powders and plants. Afterwards, as night began to fall, they travelled on foot to the mountains nearby were they waited for the full moon. Under the glow of the white light they picked a special kind of flower that only emerged at this time beneath the stars. Arlen quickly treated them, preserving them, then tucked them away in a little pouch, before moving on to their next destination beneath the moonlight.
‘Where do we go now?’ Shawn asked Arlen when all the ingredients were collected and the poison had been brewed.
‘To find his son’ Arlen grumbled back. ‘Justin…’
They travelled for many days to another place, until they reached a large estate built on open land.
‘Nice place’ Shawn noted as they stood on the lip of the hill overlooking the estate. ‘I thought it would be smaller.’
‘The boy lives here alone with only a few servants and teachers that care for him’ Arlen said in a low voice. ‘I doubt even the princess herself had a better upbringing than the boy is having now.’
Shawn shook his head to himself, muttering under his breath. ‘I still can’t believe I'm participating in this.’
‘I've just thought of something’ Annabel spoke up. ‘Who is the boy’s mother?’
Arlen pursed his lips. ‘A woman of great importance’ he replied.
‘Why does she not care for him then?’ she asked.
‘Because of who she is’ Arlen replied vaguely. He considered the two behind him. ‘Are you ready?’
‘No’ Shawn replied.
‘Let’s go’ Arlen said.
They dismounted their horses, concealing them. The animals were tied so they would not wander, and the three walked the rest of the short distance to the house, knocking on the front door.

Shawn and Annabel waited nervously behind Arlen as he waited for the door to open. Annabel reached for Shawn as he stood beside her, taking his hand and giving it a squeeze to reassure him. Shawn squeezed her hand back, quickly letting go as the door opened a crack.
'Yes?' an elderly lady dressed in the black and white of servant's clothes greeted them.
'We're here to see the boy' Arlen spoke firmly to her.
'What boy? There is no boy here.'
'Play no games with me' Arlen told her, 'Talut sent us.'
'Why?' the old asked suspiciously.
'To check on him' Arlen fabricated. 'Something happened and he fears the boy may be in danger. He can't come himself obviously. He just wants someone to check to see that he is alright.'
'We could tell him' the woman replied. 'We have messenger birds here.'
'Yeah well he seems to trust me more' Arlen said arrogantly back at her. 'How would I know of the boy if he hadn't told me?'
'You could be the one who intends to put him in danger' the servant replied.
'And if I was then how would you stop me?' Arlen asked her.
The servant didn't reply, but simply peered at them through the crack in the door.
'Let us in' Arlen told her. 'I assure you we mean no harm. You can inquire about us with your messenger birds to Talut later. But if you don't let us in, then I must assume *you* are the ones who mean to harm him.'
'Alright' the servant replied, seeing his reason.
She opened the door fully, stepping back to let them in.
'Where is he?' Arlen demanded, striding into the entrance hall, Shawn and Annabel followed silently in his footsteps.
'In the next room' the old lady indicated, staring at Shawn and Annabel suspiciously as she spoke.
Arlen could tell she wanted to ask about them, but thought better of it, knowing perhaps that she if she did ask, she would be lied to anyway. Arlen glanced towards the kitchen in the room behind the old lady, where he saw several more woman dressed in the same black and white.
'Thank you' Arlen replied shortly, before turning on his heel and marching towards the other room the old lady had indicated.
He paused when he entered the room, seeing the young boy sitting on the sofa and peering at them curiously. There was an open book on his lap.
Arlen half-turned back to the two behind him, seeing the servants watching from the hallway beyond, they had all stopped what they were doing to watch the strangers.
'Close the door' Arlen mumbled to Shawn.
Shawn felt a twinge in his stomach as he obeyed.

Arlen approached the boy with a smile.
'Hey' he said, taking a seat next to him. 'Your name is Justin, isn't it?'
'Yeah' the boy replied.
'Justin' Arlen went on. 'I'm afraid I have some bad news. I don't mean to scare you, but right now your life is in danger.'

‘Why?’
‘Your father sent me’ Arlen explained.
‘I don’t know my father’ the boy replied.
‘He is an important man, who works in a very important job. But what he does is dangerous also, and it because of this that you’ve been put in danger.’
‘Why?’ Justin asked again, his eyes wide like dinner plates now.
‘There are those who wish to hurt your father’ Arlen went on, ‘and to hurt him, they’ve gotten to you.’
Justin glanced towards Shawn and Annabel who waited silently by, before looking back at Arlen.
‘How?’ Justin asked.
‘Last night, an assassin crept into your room....’
‘Am I safe here?’ the boy worried.
‘Yes’ Arlen answered quickly. ‘He was an exceptional man, there are no others as skilled as him, save for your father. But he’s gone now, your father killed him to protect you, but he has already poisoned you.’
The boy paled.
‘Am I going to die?’
‘No’ Arlen said reaching into his coat and pulling out a small vial. ‘But you have to drink this’ he told him. ‘It’s the antidote. It will save you. I rode here as fast as I could when I found out what happened.’
‘Who are *they*?’ Justin asked, staring at Shawn and Annabel with a confused expression.
‘They're alchemists. They make medicines’ Arlen explained to the boy. ‘They made this antidote together, and they’ve come with me now to make sure you drink it.’
‘And my father trusts you?’ Justin asked.
‘Yes’ Arlen nodded. It was the first truth he had told since he entered the place. ‘Here’ he said handing the boy the vial. ‘Drink it all.’
The boy unscrewed the vial and drank the entire contents. The poison inside was clear, colourless, odourless and tasteless.
‘And this will make me better?’ the boy asked when the liquid was all gone.
‘Yes’ Arlen told him, taking the vial back. ‘Everything is fine now.’
He rose to his feet and made to leave.
‘Before you go’ the boy spoke up, Arlen paused, ‘am I safe in my bed?’ the boy asked. ‘There’s not going to be another assassin in my room is there?’
‘No’ Arlen shook his head. ‘That assassin is dead now. This house is the safest place you can be.’
Arlen strode out of the house without another word to anyone, followed quickly by Shawn and Annabel.

On their way back to Talut’s home, they moved through the city again. It was the last day of the market, and Arlen spotted something of interest. A weapon that strapped to the wrist, it was a tiny device where if the trigger was pulled, a dart would shoot out. It was high powered and with a good aim could be potentially fatal.

‘Talut has one of these’ Arlen said examining it. ‘He never takes it off. He always hides it beneath his sleeve. Maybe I should get one.’
He bought it, alongside three other small items. Three bombs small enough to sit in the palm of your hand. Twist the top, and the fuse would light, twist the centre and the ball would open, spilling the flammable liquid that could be used to light fires.
The three of them returned to Talut’s home, where he was waiting for them.
Arlen slipped his hand onto his pocket before approaching him.
‘Talut!’ he cried jovially, approaching him with arms wide open. ‘It’s good to see you again.’
He grabbed Talut by the hand, shaking it vigorously. ‘It’s so good to see you again.’
Arlen immediately stepped back and turned around, slipping into his mouth a small tablet and swallowing it whole. The antidote to the poison he had just smeared on his hand.
He faced Talut again, who was watching him closely with an uncertain look in his eyes. Arlen had dropped the act suddenly; his expression became stern.
‘Arlen’ Talut said seriously. ‘Why did you visit my son?’
‘When I just shook your hand a moment ago’ Arlen told him, ‘there was poison on my skin. You’ve got it now.’
Talut froze for a moment in disbelief.
Talut lifted his hand, staring at his palm in shock, then back at Arlen.
His head lowered, his shoulders moved back, and his eyes darkened as he clenched his fists.
‘You poisoned my son to force me to help you.’
‘You love your son very much’ Arlen said, ‘as I love my daughter. We would both do anything for our children. Help me, and I will tell you the name of the poison so you can make the antidote. You won’t see its effects until after six months, when it will slowly begin to kill you, *and* your son. Try to guess the antidote, or take the wrong one, and it will *quickly* begin to kill you.’
‘You’ll die for this’ Talut threatened. ‘Mark my word.’
‘This was my decision’ Arlen told him. ‘Know that. Shawn and Annabel had nothing to do with it.’
Talut narrowed his eyes dangerously, but said nothing.
‘You will come with us across the sea to kill the king’ Arlen told him. ‘But before we leave, I want you to convince the princess to send a small army to aid us, we will need the extra men.’
Talut didn’t answer.
‘I will be waiting for you back at the ship in Elton harbour’ Arlen said. ‘In three days time, I want you to be there.’
Talut still said nothing.
‘I’ll be waiting’ Arlen said walking away without looking back.
He left with Shawn and Annabel, and with them went the three young children he had left behind in Talut’s care. All of them began their journey back to the waiting ship.

Three days later, and Talut arrived at the shore. With him came two hundred men, on a ship of their own.
‘How in god’s name did you manage to convince him to do this?’ Shawn asked in wonder, watching nervously Talut on the ship beside theirs as he glared their way.

Talut turned and stalked off.
‘And where did he get the men from?’ Shawn added. ‘They look like they belong to the king himself.’
‘They do’ Arlen told him. ‘Those are royal soldiers.’
‘How did he…?’
‘The princess is the one who rules this country, not her parents. She tells them, and they do. In reality this is *her* army.’
‘Then how on earth did he manage to convince the princess to give us these men?’
‘Because Talut and the princess are secret lovers, they're infatuated with each other, and his son, the one we poisoned, is her son also’
Shawn instantly paled. ‘We poisoned the princess’s son?’
‘Yeah.’
‘You could have told me!’
‘Why?’ Arlen glowered at him. ‘It would only have made it harder.’
‘Are you absolutely sure Annabel is safe?’ Shawn pressed, glancing back at Annabel who sat further away on the deck with her blue violin on her lap.
‘Yes’ Arlen replied. ‘I know Talut all too well. It’s me he will punish for this, and only me.’
‘I hope you know what you're doing’ Shawn replied dryly, not in the least bit comforted.
‘I do’ Arlen told him sadly. ‘I have known Talut for over ten years, and I know what he is capable of.’
‘Arlen’ Shawn said seriously. ‘If Annabel is hurt because of this, I will never forgive you.’
‘I know’ Arlen mumbled.

The ships set sail, and they returned to the place where they had agreed to meet with the others. But not all went with them. Cam and Tala had stayed behind, having found each other, they wished no longer to be a part of war.
‘Goodbye’ Arlen had said to them; and thank you for all you’ve done.
‘I hope you find what you're looking for’ Cam said to them.
Behind Cam stood Tala, around her were gathered the three children.
‘We will raise them like a true family’ Tala had said. ‘As if they were our own.’

When their ship reached their homeland, they found a messenger waiting for them, a messenger bearing the crest of the king, a wolf eating a half-moon.
‘The king wishes to see you’ the messenger said. ‘He is waiting for you in the mountains.’

Chapter Forty-Four
The Beast of Abomination

‘Who is in charged amongst you?’ the king called.
‘I am’ Arlen replied.
Farrell was brought forwards and thrown on his knees before the king.
‘Do you know this man?’ the king called out to Arlen.

‘Yes’ Arlen hollered back.
The king pointed the crossbow at Farrell’s head.
‘Tell me where Annabel is, or I kill him!’
Arlen watched his brother coolly. Farrell, he saw had begun to panic, quivering on his knees and eyes darting all around.
Arlen exchanged a glance with the hooded Talut beside him. Talut glanced down at Arlen’s wrist, where he wore his hidden weapon.
Arlen looked calmly back at the king.
‘Now what would you want with Annabel?’ he shouted to him. ‘She is just a girl.’
‘No’ the king shook his head. ‘No don’t play games. I know what she is. I know what she can do….’ he took a deep breath. ‘I know *everything*!’ he raised his voice. ‘I know about the Weather Makers. I know about your quest. I know about Amaia!’
Arlen’s heart jolted then, breath held, eyes wide, he was about to speak again, when Farrell before the king began to stand.
He heaved himself to his feet with great effort, turning to face the king he spoke.
‘What do you know of Amaia?’ Farrell groaned to the king, holding his body as if he were in pain. Arlen saw at a glance that he had been tortured; he saw his crippled hand, the wounds over his body.
‘I know that you think she is your daughter’ the king grumbled back. ‘I know she is a Weather Maker.’
‘How?’
‘I met her.’
‘Where? When? Where is she?’ Farrell fumbled over his words in an effort to get them out. ‘Where is she?!’
‘She’s dead!’ the king snapped. ‘*I* killed her.’

Farrell’s world instantly sunk into a pit of despair.
‘No…’ he whispered, legs trembling, unable to stand anymore he fell to his knees. ‘No, you can’t…...’
Shaking hands slowly went to hold his head as his body hunched over.
‘*Nooooooo*!’ he groaned in anguish, rocking back and forth and clawing at the ground. ‘Noooooooo….’
Behind him Arlen had not moved. He only stood there in a state of shock, as pale as a ghost.
Farrell lifted his head as the king swung at him with the butt of the crossbow. Farrell was knocked to the side, jerking his head back at the king who strode towards him, lifting the weapon again. Farrell crawled desperately away on his hands and knees upon the rocky earth.
Arlen threw his arm straight, aimed and fired the weapon at his wrist. Above Farrell the king stumbled back, grabbing his throat where the dart stuck out, blood seeping between his fingers.
Arlen glanced to his side, seeing Talut had done the same as he had and fired the weapon at his wrist.
‘You missed’ Talut snapped at him.
Within the group of prisoners behind the king, Woodworm rose to his feet, striking the guard nearest him.

The king rounded and marched towards his horse as chaos ensued, pulling the dart out of his neck and holding his bleeding throat. The dart had just missed a major artery, and the king would yet live.

In the group of prisoners Woodworm was fought off, weak from hunger and pain he was little match for the man he had picked a fight with. The soldier managed to right himself without too much trouble, turning on Woodworm and swiftly stabbing him in the gut. Woodworm collapsed as the soldier jerked the knife away again.

'No' he sobbed desperately to Adam who had rushed over to him, hands held over the wound that was seeping blood at an alarming rate. 'I can't die!' Woodworm cried defiantly. 'I can't meet *her* again!'

The sounds of war echoed all around them as the two sides began to fight. Behind Arlen, Shawn and Talut, had followed their own soldiers, the ones the princess had given then, armed and ready to fight.

Adam desperately dragged Woodworm back and away from the fray, pulling him to the edge of the fighting and watching silently from a distance. He lay there with Woodworm leaning into him, arms around him as he held him from behind. He pressed down on Woodworm's belly, putting pressure on the wound in a desperate attempt to stop the bleeding.

The two of them watched as the foreign soldiers from across the sea, wearing their silver armour that glinted in the evening light, fought the men of the king, who bore the royal crest of a wolf swallowing a half-moon.

Adam held Woodworm close as they watched the king's men being slaughtered. The king had retreated, fleeing on his white stallion.

Adam drew a slow gasp at what he saw next, even Woodworm's eyes widened in shock and fear.

A colossal beast that seemed to form out of the very air itself, appeared before them. It was a monstrous mass of pink fleshy skin, with two massive arms that pulled it forwards. Its torso was deformed and twisted, with several smaller flailing arms that grew out from a mouth in the centre, which was nothing but a circle of sharp teeth. Around the torso behind what must have been the creatures head, were a collection of eyes and smaller mouths and horns.

It was an abomination.

The men began to scatter in fear, even the king's men fled as the beast dragged itself forwards, slow and cumbersome. It moaned a terrible sound that echoed in the heads of the soldiers, sounding as if it was in agony, as if its very existence caused it pain.

All the men ran; save for one.

Arlen remained where he stood, facing the thing head on.

The abomination reached one of its massive arms out towards Arlen, who slashed it with a sword, charging fearlessly towards it.

The beast howled like the wind in a storm as its arm was dismembered, hitting the ground and rolling away. Arlen lunged forwards, driving his sword straight into the creature's front, its soft skin easily letting the blade slide in all the way to the hilt.

The thing screeched and howled in agony and rage, Arlen winced as the high-pitched cries echoed in the hills, he rolled away as the beast went to grab him with its remaining forearm, leaving the sword where it was. Arlen backed off, hands clapped over his ears and grimacing

in pain as the noise sounded. The beast grabbed the sword that impaled it, jerking it out and throwing it aside before rounding on Arlen.
Arlen watched his sword sail away through the air, before glancing back at the beast.
'Shit.'
The thing swung out at him with its remaining forearm, lunging with frightening speed and hitting Arlen, sending him flying.
Arlen hit the ground hard, rolling to a stop. Temporarily disorientated he lifted his head, body swaying side to side as he rested on his front, propped up on his elbows as the world tilted. He shook his head violently to clear his mind, seeing a weapon before him as his vision focused.
A spear dropped by one of the soldiers, a good weapon with long range.
Arlen reached for it, but was unable to grab it, before he felt a hand around his ankle.
Arlen was dragged backwards, pawing at the ground and snarling in anger at the spear that was growing quickly further and further away from him.
Arlen was pulled back towards the beast that lifted him into the air. Arlen turned his head towards the mouth as he was held upside down. A horrifying mass of jagged teeth, formed around a mouth that had no jaw but was just a hole. Arlen realised suddenly with fear how easily he could fit into that large mouth.
But the beast did not try to ingest him, at least not yet. Instead Arlen felt a hand grab one of his wrists, and held upside down he looked up towards the ground, and saw with dread that the massive forearm he had cut off had regenerated. Terror gripped him further as he realised what the beast was trying to do, as it pulled him in opposite directions. It was trying to rip Arlen in two.
Arlen screamed as he felt his shoulder dislocate, fumbling desperately on his person for something, anything that could save him. When finding nothing, he balled his fist that was trapped, firing the weapon and penetrating the beast's fleshy skin. The beast moaned in agony, letting go of his arm. Arlen instantly turned his attention to the other arm that held him by his ankle, firing the last dart in the wrist weapon. The beast dropped him, stumbling back and nursing its wounds, screeching in rage.
Arlen sat up. He watched with unnatural calm as the beast thrashed around wailing, his hand went to his dislocated shoulder, and he took a deep breath. He knelt, bending his elbow on the side where his shoulder was dislocated to form an angle, ignoring the pain as he did so. He turned his arm to the side, slowly rotating it upwards and raising his arm slowly, until his shoulder slipped back into place, gritting his teeth and groaning as he did so.
He let out a heavy breath, relaxing slightly and turning his attention back on the beast which had seemed to calm slightly, and in turn was turning its attention back onto him.
It began to grumble, a low echoing moan that sounded over and over again. It heaved its bulky mass towards him again, moving closer.
Arlen watched as it approached, his mind working furiously.
'I've seen you before' Arlen spoke calmly to the beast as it drew ever closer still. 'I know your weakness.'
The gap closed between them. Arlen reached into his pocket, pulling one of the three bombs he carried, the ones he had bought in the market in the land across the sea.

The creature grabbed him again with both its arms, lifting him up as Arlen twisted the top of the bomb, lighting the fuse. He jerked his head around as he was lifted higher into the air, grasped tightly by the putrid and deformed hands of the beast. He hurled the ball, aiming for the creature's mouth, and watching as the bomb slid down its vile throat. He gritted his teeth, groaning in pain as the creature made to pull him apart again, intending to kill him. But seconds later, the bomb exploded, and Arlen was released, falling to the ground.

He picked himself off the ground again, gazing back at the abomination as it howled and screamed, burning on the inside, consumed by flames.

The creature reached for him again, with more aggression and anger than before. Arlen rolled to the side, avoiding its lunge, cutting it again and again as it wailed in anguish. But consumed by fire and in pain, Arlen managed to avoid its blows as it thrashed around desperately; leaping out of the way of a falling mound of rock as the creature stumbled back, hitting the mountain behind it.

Arlen faltered then, suddenly noticing something. A lump on the beast that was different from the other deformities on its body. As Arlen stared at it closely, he saw that it was throbbing, beating.

'A heart…' Arlen whispered.

He threw away the sword he had hastily picked up, choosing instead another fallen weapon, this time a spear. Kneeling and glancing up briefly at the creature as he worked, he pulled out another bomb, twisting it in the middle and pouring the entire contents of the flammable liquid onto the sharp tip of the spear. The third bomb, the last one he had. He twisted the top, lighting the fuse and using the spark to light the oil coated on the spear tip.

Arlen threw the bomb away; it rolled and exploded behind him as he rose again to his feet, the tip of the spear burned brightly now, wreathed in flame and glowing in the dark. He strode towards the beast as it thrashed around, moving faster the closer he drew towards it. Arlen was meters away. He reached an arm out to balance himself, pulling the other arm back, the one he held the spear with, and threw.

The flaming spear soared through the air and hit its mark, penetrating straight through the beating heart and driving through the soft pink mass.

It screamed a human scream, a girl's scream, as the whole body was consumed in a roaring ball of fire, a red-hot inferno.

The thing wailed in agony, every inch of it quivering. It burned like a torch, before fading away like a spirit until nothing was left of it except for ash, which floated away and scattered in the wind.

Arlen let out a breath, stepping back, but not taking his eyes away from where it had stood.

'Gods' Adam whispered as he stared at Arlen, seeing what he had done. 'He isn't human…'

Arlen strode away, heading across the rocks and towards Farrell who knelt, hidden in the shadows. He reached a hand out for him to take.

Farrell stared up at his brother uncertainly, before accepting his hand silently, and rising to his feet.

'I don't believe him' Arlen said to Farrell later on when they were alone.

‘Why?’ Farrell whispered back, his crippled hand held close to his chest.
‘The king has no loyalties to tell us either true or lies’ Arlen replied. ‘I feel the same as I do before.’
‘But what if it’s true?’ Farrell spoke hesitantly.
‘It isn’t’ Arlen answered stubbornly. ‘Amaia *is* alive. And we *will* find her.’
‘Do you really believe that?’
‘Yes.’
‘But why?’
‘Because’ Arlen answered, ‘I have faith…’
Standing side by side they stared out onto the world below them. The sun cast its glow onto the land at their feet, lighting up the golden river before them as it ran its gentle course into the sea. The green earth that stretched as far as they could see was a picture of tranquillity and peace, a far world from the one they lived now, where their hearts stirred only in darkness. Arlen and Farrell could not see the beauty around them; only feel the cold chill of the morning air, and the loneliness of the world in which they lived.
‘I still love her’ Arlen said after a time. ‘I still love Ramana. I still think about her……even after all this time.’
‘Yeah’ Farrell said meekly. ‘Me too.’
‘Do you remember how she used to laugh?’
‘Cackle you mean.’
Arlen smiled.
Farrell took a deep breath before speaking next.
‘Arlen’ he said, half-turning to him. ‘Do you still hate me?’
‘Yes’ Arlen replied shortly.
‘But…you saved my life earlier…that bolt…’
‘Was fired by the man that stood beside me’ Arlen finished. ‘The hooded one. My shot missed.’
‘But you still fired the shot’ Farrell pressed. ‘You were *trying* to help me.’
Arlen faced him now.
‘Why would you bother if you didn’t even care?’ Farrell asked him.
‘Amaia would want you to live’ Arlen answered. He made to leave.
‘Arlen’ Farrell said sharply, stopping him. ‘Do you remember when you saved my life many years ago, from that same creature you fought and killed earlier? You stood between the creature and me, you protected me….do you remember that?’
‘No.’
‘I know you remember’ Farrell insisted as Arlen tried to leave again. ‘I just wanted to ask you…. what were you thinking at the time? Why did you do it….? I have to know.’
Arlen turned back to him.
‘At the time…’ he said, ‘nothing else mattered.’
He left then. Farrell did not try to stop him.
Farrell looked to the sky above him. The clouds shone in pink and yellow light, before a sky that was faded blue.
‘Amaia…’ he spoke aloud. ‘*Where are you?’*

He took the paper hidden in his pocket, something he had carried the whole two months he had been imprisoned and tortured. He held it open with his one good hand. His injured hand had healed, but he would be crippled forever.
Farrell looked at the picture. It was the picture that man had drawn him, of what Amaia might look like now.
Farrell held it before him, staring blankly at the charcoal face, eyes distant.
He opened his fingers; the paper slipped from his grasp and sailed away in the breeze, floating down the rocky slope, towards the earth and away.
It was shortly after when Farrell slept, that he dreamed.
'Here' Farrell said, 'for you.'
Ramana lifted her beautiful eyes to him, gazing lovingly at her husband. Ignoring the bowl of fruit he held out to her, instead she leapt at him, knocking him onto his back and leaning over him.
'Hey!' he protested, still holding onto the bowl clumsily and trying not to spill the contents. 'Be careful, you don't want me to…'
His words were cut off as she kissed him, long and deep. Farrell moaned in pleasure, kissing her back and running his free hand down her body. Her long black hair fell about her face, shielding them from the world.
'Not again!' came a voice of complaint.
Ramana leant back away from Farrell, grinning guiltily to their daughter. Farrell stayed on his back for a moment, staring up into the perfect blue sky above, catching his breath and calming his racing heart.
He sat up, seeing Ramana pinching Amaia's cheeks and trying to kiss her. Amaia squealed in alarm and tried to escape. Ramana instead wrapped her arms around Amaia and squeezed her, kissing her several times on the cheek as the little green bird named Yayew, ran in circles around them squawking.
'Nooooo!' Amaia cried, desperately trying to get away from her. 'Let me go!'
'But I love you' Ramana said innocently, after attacking her mercilessly with kisses for several seconds. She ceased her assault now, simply holding her. Amaia's little body clutched to her own. 'My daughter' Ramana breathed. 'My precious treasure.' She whispered into her ear. 'I love you so much…'
'Let me go!' Amaia gasped. 'I can't breathe!'
Ramana released Amaia suddenly, causing Amaia to fall ungracefully back onto the picnic blanket. The bird instantly quietened once Amaia had been released, clambering awkwardly to sit on her lap.
Farrell reached into the basket beside them as they sat, the tall grass in the meadow swayed gently around them in the warm breeze. He lifted a bottle of wine, pouring a glass and offering it to Amaia.
'Would you like to try some?' he said to her. 'It's what grownups drink.'
Amaia's expression instantly lit up, and her eyes grew like saucers as she stared at the deep red liquid.
She reached tiny hands towards it, but before she could grasp it, Ramana's hand shot out. She slapped the glass out of Farrell's hand, frowning furiously at him.
'Amaia is too young to drink that stuff' she glowered.

‘Nonsense’ Farrell sang back at her, ignoring the fallen glass that seeped wine onto their picnic blanket, staining the fabric. ‘Brice gives his son wine all the time.’
‘Shawn is older’ Ramana argued, speaking loudly over Amaia’s protests at being treated like a child. She put her hand over Amaia’s face and shoved her back playfully, causing Amaia to become even more irate and indignant.
‘Hush now’ Ramana cooed at her as Amaia became ever louder. ‘You can have maybe a tiny sip when you're a little older.’
‘But that’s not fair!’
‘Shush my child’ Ramana whispered, kissing her forehead. ‘Be still.’ She held her again, this time gently. Her other hand she reached out for Farrell, pulling him towards her in a hug. ‘These days…’ Ramana sighed blissfully content, ‘have been the happiest in my life…’
‘Ramana….’ Farrell whispered, lip quivering and tears coming to him. ‘I miss you so much…’
He looked then to Amaia, who stared blankly back at him.
Farrell reached a hand forward to touch her, intending to caress her and stroke her hair back. But he woke before he was able to do so, staring up at the canvas of the tent above him.
He let out a sigh, feeling his heart sinking in his chest. And then he heard the noise again that had woke him. Nearby, just outside his tent, he could hear Woodworm’s voice.
He was shouting and kicking up a fuss. Farrell listened to him. He sounded to be in pain.

Woodworm moaned again, gritting his teeth and throwing his head back as he lay on the bed outside. Around him were others like him that had been injured in the fight, but because his wounds were severe, he was one of the first to be seen by a healer.
‘Give me drugs!’ he demanded clutching his wound. ‘Give me medicine! Make it stop hurting!’
‘Keep still’ Adam ordered him, trying to hold him down.
Woodworm tensed, lying back and obeying as the healer lifted his shirt to see the wound. He had been stabbed.
He tensed in pain, screwing his eyes tight shut as the healer pressed a cold damp cloth to his skin to clean the blood away.
‘Will you hurry up man?!’ Woodworm demanded. ‘I haven’t got all day!’
A few hours later and Woodworm rested on a bed in one of the tents, still and quiet as he slept. Adam found him again and spoke to him, Woodworm being a light sleeper, woke as he heard him approaching.
‘They said you wouldn’t make it’ Adam told him. ‘They said you would die for sure.’
‘Well they were wrong then weren’t they’ he replied.
‘You should have died’ Adam pressed. ‘That wound was severe. How did you live?’
‘Willpower’ Woodworm answered flatly. ‘I am desperate to live. I *must* live.’
Adam hummed thoughtfully to himself.
‘Earlier’ Adam spoke, ‘you said something. You said you can’t die…. because you can’t meet *her* again. What did you mean?’

‘Ahhh’ Woodworm sighed, shifting in his bed. ‘That is a tragic story indeed, and I suppose I may as well tell someone now before I die, and my name isn’t really Woodworm. It’s William.’
He took a heavy breath, closing his eyes as he did.
‘I’ll tell you what I meant’ he said. ‘Someone may as well know…. before I die…as all men do in the end.’

Chapter Forty-Five
Past Events

William stilled, listening to the sounds outside his bedroom. There was the sound of muffled talking, people moving from one room to another, but not going towards his.
He looked down again, sitting on the floor with his trousers pulled down to expose his thigh.
He took another steady breath, lifting the knife, and ran it across his skin. The long cut he had pressed into himself was one to join many others on his thigh, some old, some new. He was about to make another, when he froze.
There were footsteps heading towards his room.
William rose swiftly, pulling his trousers up and very carefully tucking the knife in his belt behind him. He waited, standing at the back of the room against the wall.
His bedroom door opened, and William saw *him* standing there.
He smiled. ‘Your mother’s just gone out’ the man said closing the door after him.
William stared hard at him as the man moved casually to his bed.
‘She won’t be back for a while now.’
William did not answer.
The man sat on the bed, smiling at William.
‘Why don’t you come over here?’ the man suggested nicely.
‘I think…’ William said firmly, ‘I am rather happy where I am.’
‘Don’t make this harder for yourself.’
William still didn’t move.
The man sighed, rising and moving towards him.
‘Stay back!’ William snapped at him, producing the knife and pointing it at him. ‘You will not touch me again.’
‘What are you doing?’ the man sighed wearily.
‘Keep your…’ William made a face of disgust, ‘*filthy* hands off me. I'm getting away from here’ he said, still pointing the knife and heading carefully to the door, never taking his eyes from the man. ‘I'm leaving. I'm going someplace better.’
‘Where will you go?’ the man asked lazily.
‘Anywhere’ William growled back. He let go with one hand the knife, and fumbled behind him for the door handle.
‘But your mother….’

‘Doesn’t care’ William finished. ‘If she did, she would have gotten rid of *you* long ago.’ William opened the door behind him. ‘Have fun explaining this to her’ he told him shortly, smiling inwardly at the man, who he could see was now beginning to grow nervous and uncertain. ‘Oh, and by the way’ William added, ‘I'm borrowing your horse. Actually, I'm just taking it. Forever. Don’t try to stop me or else I might do something drastic.’
‘You’ll be back’ the man said arrogantly. ‘You’ve nowhere else to go.’
‘We’ll see about that shall we?’ William answered, backing down the corridor.
When he reached the top of the stairs, he ran down them, glancing back quickly to see if the man was following him. He wasn’t.
As quick as he could William took his horse and rode away, not even bothering to take any food. He dared not linger. Now all he had in the world, were the clothes he wore, a knife, and a horse.

Life from then on had been hard, and he lived day by day only just surviving. Years later he had left his knife behind, along with the painful memories, and now worked at an inn, serving drinks, clearing rooms and caring for the guest’s horses alongside the one he had stolen, which was now his own.
It was here that one day, he met *her*.
She was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen in his life, perfect in every single way.
She would visit the inn often, and William would watch her in secret for ages. The way she played with her earring absent-mindedly as she listened to others talk, the way she laughed at jokes, the way she smiled and moved and talked. She always dressed beautifully, and William thought that she must be rich, but when he plucked up the courage one day to ask her, fearing each time he saw her might be his last, she giggled at him.
‘No’ she beamed. ‘I'm not rich, though it’s nice of you to say so.’
‘Would you…’ William began nervously, ‘…like to get a drink…with me?’
‘Sure’ she smiled.
It was very quickly after that, that the two were married.
‘Do you promise to hold and love each other’ the Holy Ghost spoke, ‘through the best and worst until the end of your days?’
‘I do’ William smiled at her, holding her hands in his.
‘I do’ she answered him, smiling warmly back at him, her eyes glowing with happiness.
Things were great after that, and the two lived together happily. William constantly showered her with affection, and treated her like she was a goddess.
But these days were short, and then he began to see fault in her.
‘You're going out *again?*’ he said to her one day.
‘Yes’ she shot back.
‘Why? Where? With who?’
‘Just some friends’ she replied dismissively.
‘What are their names?’
‘Lucy’ she shrugged, ‘Bonnie…Joe…’
‘Joe?’ William picked up instantly. ‘Who’s that?’
‘I told you’ she snapped, ‘just a friend.’
‘Are you lying to me?’ William stepped forward. ‘Are you cheating?’

She threw her bags down then, tears in her eyes. ‘I can’t do this anymore!’ she shrieked at him. ‘You're breaking my heart!’
A short time after that, after only being married for a few short months, she left him.
William glared through the window to the rain outside, watching her as she packed her bags.
When he ran into her by chance a week or so later, she with was with another man.
‘Who the fuck is this?’ William demanded of her.
‘William’ she answered sternly before storming off with the man she was with. ‘We are finished. Stay out of my life.’
William went home angry that day, but he could not get her out of his head, and he could not forget the face of the man she was with. That night, he took his sword, and went to pay her a visit.

It was late when he reached her house, and he entered the building easily, creeping up the stairs as quietly as he could. He opened the bedroom door, seeing two profiles sleeping on the bed.
He stepped carefully towards them and onto the bed itself, standing over the two.
Closer now, he could see each person. His wife lay fast asleep, the man she was with earlier by her side.
William lifting his sword, and slowly drew it, placing the sheath carefully on the bed and straightening up again. He stood directly over the man in the bed. The man shifted slightly in his sleep, before falling still again.
William slowly raised his sword, the tip pointed towards the man, waiting for a moment.
He plunged the weapon downwards with all the strength he could muster. He stabbed him through the chest with so much force; the tip of the sword touched the wooden floor beneath the bed.
His wife began to stir in the bed beside the dying man, who could not utter a sound. But his eyes were wide and his mouth was opening and closing helplessly in shock.
Before his wife could react at all, before she even knew what was happening, William knelt over her, grabbing her by the throat and squeezing tight.
Her eyes widened in recognition as he strangled her. She was unable to cry, as William stared back unblinking into her eyes, emotionless and cold.
He did not let go, until she was dead.

Immediately after, he left his job at the inn to search for something else. Travelling alone with his horse, one day he was walking through a section of woods near a village, when he found a terrified boy with a fresh burn that covered half his face.
‘Hey there kid’ he frowned down at the boy. ‘Are you alright?’

Chapter Forty-Six
Annabel's Ending

'I've killed many people in my life' William explained, 'but never before have I felt life ebb away beneath my very fingers.'
'You're a scary man you know that?' Adam said.
'What was I supposed to do?' William snarled. 'She left me. I could not live with the heartache, and I could not let her live knowing she was with someone else.'
'You should have just let it go' Adam told him calmly.
'No' William sighed. 'I couldn't.'
'You shouldn't hang onto the past' Bill said from the doorway of the tent.
He had been absent for the longest time, and William had begun to worry. But now here he stood.
'Bill' William sighed with relief. 'You're alive!'
'You bet' Bill laughed stepping into the tent.
'I thought for a moment that the beast had had you.'
'Not me' Bill said sitting heavily on the edge of William's bed. 'I'm tough.'
'Do you mind?' William spoke to Adam. 'I want to talk to Bill alone.'
'Sure' Adam nodded, rising. He left the tent.
William spoke to Bill now.
'Bill…. how have you been?'

In the confusion of the aftermath of the fight, it took them far too long to realise something was wrong. But when Shawn returned to them after going back down the mountainside to the ships to check on Annabel, he returned in a panic.
'She's gone!' he cried to Arlen. 'Annabel's gone!'
Arlen rose from his seat, speaking to Shawn.
'Are you sure she hasn't…'
'No' Shawn shouted back, grabbing Arlen's shoulders and shaking him. 'The few soldiers we left there to guard her are dead!' he faltered then, as more thoughts began to process in his mind. 'Oh gods…' he said. 'That's why the king left so quickly……he doesn't care about us…he only wanted her….'
He let go of Arlen, wandering a few steps away, and going completely pale.
'Gods…' he said again. 'I let this happen...'
'Shawn' Arlen said sternly. 'Stop for a minute. Let's think about this...'
Whatever he said after that, Shawn didn't hear him, so caught up was he in the fear and panic of losing her.
'Anna…' he whispered to himself beginning to tremble. 'I'm going to find her' Shawn spoke loudly now.
'No' Arlen said.
'What do you mean no?' Shawn demanded rounding on him. 'Why not?'
'You're rushing into this too fast' Arlen reasoned. 'You'll put yourself in danger. Talut is going to kill the king. Annabel will be safe.'

‘Why hasn’t he already left yet?’
‘Calm down’ Arlen told him, raising a hand. ‘It’s no small task what he’s about to do. I'm sure there’s some level of preparation involved.’
‘It’s not good enough’ Shawn glowered. ‘Every minute Annabel is gone…...what could be happening to her *right now*? She could be suffering. In pain…’
He paused.
‘I've got to go’ he said, turning on his heel and marching away.
‘Shawn’ Arlen raised his voice following him. ‘Stay where you are!’
‘I don’t take orders from you’ he shot back without pausing. ‘I have to save her. I’ll do it alone if I have you.’
‘You could die!’
‘*I WOULD RISK THAT FOR HER*!’ Shawn called back turning to face him again.
Arlen halted.
Shawn glared furiously at him; then began to walk away again.
‘Shawn! *Stop!*’
Shawn didn’t listen, but continued to make his way towards the horses, many of which were still saddled.
Arlen started towards Shawn before he could reach them, grabbing him from behind to try to stop him. Shawn immediately threw his head back, smacking Arlen in the nose.
He turned to face him as Arlen stumbled back.
Shawn stood there, shoulders hunched, legs apart, waiting, for what Arlen would do next.
Arlen lowered his hands from his bleeding nose, straightening up.
Arlen strode towards him; unsure of what he would do Shawn attacked him first.
Shawn grabbed him by the wrist and swung his elbow, striking Arlen hard across the face, then back again, with the bony tip. Arlen stumbled back, falling to his knees and holding himself, fighting to stay conscious.
He lifted his head towards Shawn again, upper lip curling in anger.
Arlen rose to his feet gingerly, shaking his head to clear his mind, and moved forwards again. Lunging towards him and striking Shawn several times in the chest, pushing him back, finishing off with a blow to the head. Shawn staggered, but recovered quickly, spinning around and grabbing Arlen’s wrist as he made a move for him again. Holding his wrist and pulling Arlen toward him as he struck out, kicking him with the base of his boot in his waist below Arlen’s ribs. Arlen staggered back, holding himself double over, his head still swimming from when Shawn had hit him first.
Arlen gritted his teeth, persistent. He moved quickly again, grabbing Shawn as he went to strike him, sweeping his leg behind Shawn’s, knocking him off balance and throwing him to the floor. Arlen knelt on his chest and punched him hard in the face; Shawn was only able to free himself by slashing up at Arlen with a knife he had hidden up his sleeve, rising again as Arlen drew back. Arlen was quickly able to disarm him before swinging a fist at him again. With one hand Shawn diverted this blow, with the other hand he struck Arlen hard in the abdomen, using his own body weight against him and throwing him to the floor. Kicking him once hard in the side and balling his fist, using his body weight to strike down at Arlen again in the abdomen as hard as he could.
Shawn pulled back as Arlen held himself, moaning in agony and unable to fight any longer.
‘Enough’ he gasped. ‘Enough...

Shawn straightened and stormed off, heading again towards the saddled horses. He mounted one of the steeds, pausing only briefly to glance down at Arlen as he sat up gingerly. Other men from nearby who had seen the fight, approached to see if he was alright. Shawn kicked his horse hard and rode swiftly away.
'Are you alright?' one man said to Arlen as he lay on his side. 'What happened?'
'I'm fine…' Arlen gasped. 'I'll be fine…'
Arlen accepted the soldiers help as he put an arm around him and lifted Arlen to his feet. Arlen staggering again, leaning heavily on the soldier for support and grasping his head. He straightened, moaning as his body pained him.
'What happened here?' the soldier asked him.
'Nothing' Arlen said through gritted teeth. 'Not much….'
He groaned again, holding himself.
'I'll be fine' he whispered, taking his arm back from the soldier who supported him.
'Perhaps you should see a healer?' the soldier suggested.
'No' Arlen shook his head, standing tall now. 'I've lived through much worse. I'll be fine.'

Talut left them shortly after, setting out to kill the king once he had prepared all he needed. He vanished into the night to complete his task. Back at the camp, the others waited.
'Why don't we go after them?' Adam suggested to Arlen after a time.
'No' Arlen droned. 'There is nothing we can do that Talut won't do himself. If anything, we'd just get in the way.'
'But Shawn…'
'No' Arlen said quietly. 'We cannot help him.'
Adam watched Arlen closely. His face was cut and swollen and bruised, and there were numerous other bruises over his body, hidden from view beneath his clothes, the wounds he had sustained from his fight with Shawn. But although they hurt him, Arlen hid the pain. It was nothing he wasn't used to.
Adam cursed under his breath, gritting his teeth.
'What is it Adam' Arlen asked him not looking at him.
'Where is Tristan?' he muttered in response under his breath. 'He's been gone for ages…. he wasn't amongst the dead last time we were attacked, and he hasn't met us here.' He glanced away before looking back again. 'Where on earth is he? It's awfully suspicious if you ask me.'
'I'm sure you're right' Arlen nodded bleakly. 'I very much doubt that he is dead. Planning something behind our backs most likely, I'm sure we will see him again sometime.'

Shawn rode the distance to the capital without rest. By the time he arrived at the palace, his horse was exhausted and near ready to collapse.
He tied the creature up nearby, somewhere hidden where it would not be seen. He watched the palace for hours, walking back and forth, trying to find the best place to enter.
After a time, he saw a small tunnel protruding from the rocks at the back of the palace. It was narrow and dingy, a small river running nearby.
He approached through this way, sneaking down the quiet corridor beneath the rocks. He had found the right place. This was the exit from the jails.

He clung in the shadows for hours, feeling horribly exposed as he listened to the murmurs of guards nearby, and with nowhere to hide, he stayed crouched where he was, until the voices moved off.
The corridors were long, and there were many different paths winding and twisting and turning, there were so many places guards could emerge from and catch him.
Shawn put the thought from his mind. He proceeded, coming behind an armed guard who stood with his back to him. Shawn hid for many minutes behind a corner, before stepping out, having not heard another sound for a long while.
'I have a crossbow aimed at your back' he spoke in a low voice. The guard immediately tensed. 'If you move, turn around or make any noise I'll kill you.' He waited for a moment. 'Where are the others?' he asked quietly. 'You can speak.'
'They come and go' the guard answered shortly, not daring to turn. 'There's no one here at the moment.'
'Where is the black-haired woman that was brought here recently?'
'Are you her lover?' the guard asked with a sneer in his voice.
'Piss me off' Shawn answered quickly, 'and I kill you. Where is she?'
'End of the corridor on the right.'
Shawn approached him slowly.
'Where are the keys to the cells?'
The guard hesitated, glancing down at himself.
Shawn made a lunge for him, the two fought; Shawn struggled against the burly armoured man, managing to subdue him long enough to plunge his knife downwards through the guard's shoulder between the armour. Jerking the knife back as the unfortunate guard crumpled beneath him.
He snatched the keys from the dead man, and was just dragging his body back to hide it, when another guard rounded the corner.
They both froze in shock at the sight of one another.
Then the guard drew his sword, starting towards him. Shawn raised his knife. They fought, but in the close quarters of the narrow tunnel, the guard was at a disadvantage, and Shawn was able to beat him back, driving the knife into the man's armpit between his armour. But not before he felt the tip of the sword sink into him, and back out again.
Shawn pushed the guard back, letting go of the knife that remained in the body of the guard as he fell.
Shawn leant against the wall behind him, holding his side, feeling suddenly afraid.
He dared to look down at himself, sobbing in frustration.
He was bleeding.
Shawn straightened up, forcing himself onwards. He bent down to pick up the fallen keys, making his way back down the corridor and towards the cells.
He headed to the end of the corridor, towards the door on the right. As he went by several other doors, he passed other figures that were imprisoned. Having been alerted by the sound of fighting, they stood at their doors, peering through the little barred windows towards him.
Shawn counted seven faces. Seven Weather Makers imprisoned here besides Annabel.
Shawn passed them, and reached the door at the end of the corridor.
'Anna' Shawn hissed.

‘Shawn?’ came the response immediately.
Annabel’s face appeared.
‘What are you doing here?’ she asked him incredulous.
Shawn grimaced in pain, gritting his teeth; hand pressed to his side.
‘I came for you’ he gasped. ‘I couldn’t leave you.’
‘I thought you had forgotten about me.’
‘No’ Shawn whispered back to her, touching her face through the bars. ‘I could never….’ He glanced down the corridor, before lifting the keys.
‘What about the others?’ Annabel asked him when the door was open.
‘I can’t save them’ Shawn told her firmly. ‘I'm sorry…. I just…. they know I'm here…’
‘Shawn?’ Annabel asked him, worry laced her tone. ‘What's wrong?’
‘Nothing I'm fine’ he answered abruptly. ‘Now come on, we have to hurry.’
He followed her down the corridor, but couldn’t keep up.
‘Which way?’ she asked him when they reached the end of the corridor which split in two.
‘Left’ Shawn whispered, following after her and trying his best to straighten.
Annabel walked swiftly down the corridor, rounding a corner but immediately stepping back. They waited there for the voices of the guards around the corner to fade away. Behind Annabel, Shawn leant against the wall for support. He was beginning to pale now; he could feel the warm touch of the blood running from the wound and down his leg.
Annabel looked back at him wide-eyed.
‘Shawn?’
His knees buckled, and he slid down the wall, hunched over.
‘Shawn’ Annabel hissed in a whisper. ‘What happened?’
She moved his hand away forcefully as he held himself, to see what was wrong.
‘You're hurt…’ she stammered drawing back at the sight of blood.
Shawn didn’t answer.
‘This is my fault’ she panicked. ‘I'm so sorry.’
‘No’ Shawn told her. ‘It was my choice to come…. I couldn’t leave you…’
‘Shawn…’
‘I couldn’t leave you’ he repeated.
There were tears in his eyes.

They escaped the prison.
Their progress was slow, Shawn walked with his arm slung around Annabel, and she did her best to support him. But when they reached the outside world again, it wasn’t far along the road they had walked when Shawn collapsed.
‘Shawn!’ Annabel cried in horror.
‘I’ll be fine’ Shawn said, his voice shaking, and skin ever growing paler still. ‘I’ll be fine…’
‘Please don’t die’ Annabel begged him. ‘Please…. I love you…’
He met her eyes.
‘Anna’ Shawn whispered to her, reaching out to touch her face, his body quivering as if he were freezing. ‘Tell…tell my family….’
But they were the last words he ever spoke. As Annabel held him in her arms, caressing his face with a shaking hand, she saw that he was already dead.

She bowed her head over his, as the realisation was slowly sinking in.
'*No Shawn*…' she whispered to him as she began to cry. 'Please don't leave me….'
She looked down at him, hand beneath his chin, turning his head up to face hers. But he saw nothing.
'*No*……. oh gods no…. this can't be happening.' She leant forward, sobbing into his chest, falling back on her heels, holding his dead weight in both her arms.
She screamed, pulling at his hair and clothes, bawling hysterically as she rocked him back and forth.
'I love you Shawn' she said over and over again. 'I love you…. I love you so much…'
Tears streamed down her red cheeks as she cried.
'…Why? Why do you have to leave me? Why do things have to end this way…?'
There were sounds coming from down the road they had walked, in the direction of the palace, and the prisons.
The guards had heard her, and were coming her way.
Annabel lowered her head again, kissing Shawn's forehead, before laying him gently down upon the earth.
'Goodbye….' she whispered, backing away from him, '…my love….'
She strode back down the path, towards the guards that approached her now.
They saw her.
Annabel threw her hands out, the trees on the road either side coming to life and flailing around.
The only thing that could describe what followed was a bloodbath, as Annabel proceeded to rip apart every man she saw, limb from limb, and splay their guts and bloodied remains upon the forest floor.
But more kept coming, flooding from the palace beyond sight. When she began to tire, she retreated into the woods, creating a great wall between herself and her pursuers. A tangled mass of weeds and thorns and trees and ivy, and by the time the guards managed to find a way around, she was long gone.
'Hey' one guard spoke to the other when it was all over. 'Look at this.'
They approached the body of a man, the only one in sight that had not been mangled beyond recognition. He was a handsome man in his early thirties, pale; the stab wound that had ended his life clearly visible now. The blood had smeared his clothes.
'I wonder who he was' said the other guard leaning forwards.

Annabel would wander the next few weeks alone. She began the long trek to the home Shawn once lived, to deliver the news, passing her own home along the way.
When she reached Shawn's village, she found his family home.
An older woman answered the door, a woman whose name was Alice.
Annabel took a deep breath, and explained herself.
Alice fell to her knees, crying into her hands.

By the time Annabel returned to her own family, many days after that, she was weak from hunger, exhausted, hair greasy and mud and filth covering her boots and dress.
Her father working outside in the field saw her, staring in utter shock and disbelief. He called inside the house for his wife to come out. Her parents ran to her, embracing her, neither could believe she had returned to them after all this time.
Annabel collapsed in their arms, sobbing hysterically.
Her father lifted her in his arms, and carried her home.

Chapter Forty-Seven
The Seven

Talut returned, having been gone for only a few days.
'Talut' Arlen said, feeling a deep trepidation growing inside at the sight of him. 'I didn't see you there.'
As usual, Arlen had wandered from the others to be alone. This is where Talut had found him, in the mountains where the men waited.
Talut advanced on Arlen, but Arlen stood his ground.
'The king is dead' Talut grumbled.
'Good job' Arlen replied flatly.
'He was already dead when I found him' Talut went on. He lifted a bag he was carrying, pulling out what was inside and throwing it at Arlen's feet. 'There is your proof.'
Arlen stared down at the king's head below him; then glanced back up at Talut.
'Already dead?' Arlen repeated.
'And I have freed the Weather Makers imprisoned in the palace' Talut continued, glancing behind him.
Arlen suddenly noticed faint silhouettes hanging back behind Talut, clinging to the dark.
'Come closer' Talut said to them.
He turned to face Arlen again as several women stepped forward, coming into view just behind him. Arlen looked to each of their faces. They were all young, about the same age Amaia would be, or thereabouts.
'Amaia was not among them' Talut said. He spoke to the women behind him now. 'Do you see those fires before you? There is a camp; I want you all to go there. Now.'
The woman all obliged, walking with their heads down and clinging to one another. Arlen watched them curiously as they passed him by. Only one or two spared him a glance before rushing on.
'Tell me' Talut growled dangerously to Arlen when they were alone again. 'What is the poison inside me?'
Arlen hesitated.

‘I fulfilled my end of the bargain’ Talut spat, barely able to keep his anger back. ‘Now you fulfil yours.’ He gritted his teeth. ‘I must save my son.’
Arlen took a deep breath, preparing himself for what would happen next.
‘Sinful child’ he said. ‘That is the name of the poison.’
Talut narrowed his eyes, staring at Arlen hard as if to determine if he were lying. Then he bolted towards him without warning.
Arlen stepped back as Talut threw up his cloak to distract him, and suddenly Arlen felt hands around him. Talut had grabbed him from behind. As quick as the blink of an eye, Arlen felt something slide into his stomach and out again.
Talut jerked him back roughly, holding him tight.
‘You are going to spend the rest of your short life in terrible agony’ Talut snarled at him. ‘There is no cure for this.’
He shoved Arlen forwards onto his knees, wiping his thin blade clean.
When Arlen looked around, Talut was already gone.

Talut was marching down the path around the edge of the camp, when he ran into a figure.
‘Who’s that?’ Bill asked squinting. ‘Talut? What are you doing here? Why are there suddenly women in our camp? Did *you* bring them?’
Talut strode past him silently; then turned swiftly back.
He slid his hand around Bill’s neck, running underneath his jaw and grabbed his own bicep. With the other hand, he pushed Bill’s head forward.
‘Rest now my friend’ he whispered into his ear as Bill chuckled wearily in his grasp. ‘Go to the next place, where you will suffer no more.’
He began to squeeze.
Bill struggled weakly against him, but his efforts were futile. Talut held him there, until Bill’s arms dropped to his side, and he struggled no more. He lay Bill carefully down on the ground, whispering a prayer over him quickly before vanishing into the night, taking with him the army he had brought.
The next day, there would be no trace of any of them. The princess’s army was gone, and Talut was never seen in these lands again.

Farrell was sitting in the camp warming himself by the fire when the women arrived. Suddenly, beside him Adam spoke.
‘What in the name of Ludus and her blue crown is that?’
Farrell glanced around, straightening in curiosity at the sight that was before him.
Seven women huddling together looking frightened and more than a little out of place, stood at the edge of the firelight. They waited as if for something to happen.
‘Where did they come from?’ Adam wondered as Farrell rose to his feet.
But William was the first to approach them.
‘Who are you?’ he demanded. ‘And what are you doing here?’
‘We are Weather Makers’ one of the braver women spoke up. ‘We were set free by a man and brought here.

‘A man? It must be Talut’ William realised. ‘Where is he?’ he spoke back to the women.
A short time later and Bill was found dead.
‘What the hell is going on?’ Adam said aloud as a small crowed began to gather around his body. ‘Why would Talut do this?’
Beside him stood Arlen, he was staring silently down at Bill. His hand unconsciously went to his stomach, his might fraught with fear.

A pyre was built for Bill and his body placed upon it. William took the burning torch and set the thing alight. There were tears in his eyes as he stepped back.
Surrounding the pyre, the Weather Makers stood. Each lifted her hand, performing a different spell, now that it was safe for them to do so, since the king was dead. One blew the wind, so that the fire burned more brightly, another summoned forth a garden to surround the fire’s base, and another brought forth a great light, burning like a star above them for all to see.
When the fire had burned down and the people dispersed, William and Adam sat on the edge of the rocky hillside, staring down at the smouldering pile of what remained.
‘Do you believe in an afterlife?’ William asked Adam.
Adam took a pause before answered.
‘I hope so’ he said.
Later that night, Arlen collapsed.

He was carried indoors to one of the tents and laid down, away from the curiosity of the other soldiers who milled around outside.
‘Arlen’ Adam said. ‘What's wrong?’
‘It hurts’ Arlen whimpered sadly, clutching his stomach. ‘It hurts…’
William removed Arlen’s hand and saw on his shirt a dark red patch. Behind William one of the Weather Makers lit up a light in her hand, shining it down upon Arlen as William lifted his shirt to see.
They saw a thin slit near his stomach, but nothing more.
‘Arlen’ Adam said sternly. ‘What is this?’
Arlen stared back at him reluctantly.
‘Talut…poisoned me’ he said when pressed. ‘He killed Bill…and left with his men.’
A short time after that and Arlen began to convulse, clenching his fists beside his bed and balling up in his fists, small piles of dirt.
‘Please…’ he whispered to the Weather Maker that stayed by his bed, gazing up at her with pleading eyes. ‘I can’t take it…. make it stop…. please…...’
She held his head in comfort, moving close to him, but said nothing.
‘We have to take him to a healer’ William told the others gathered outside the tent.
‘There is one near here’ Adam informed them, ‘a temple where there are many healers.’
‘I’ll go’ Farrell said.
‘As will William and I.’ Adam was already marching away to fetch some horses, these were some the king had left behind. ‘But we have to move as soon as possible. I don’t know how long he will last.’

Arlen was helped upon the horse, held by Adam who sat behind him in the saddle. Beside them William and Farrell mounted their own horses, Farrell holding the reins awkwardly in his crippled hand.
They rode away together, and took him to the nearest temple of healing, only a short distance away from their camp in the mountains.

Chapter Forty-Eight
Prayer

'Please help me' Arlen whispered to the healer as he lay on the bed clutching his stomach. 'My body…it's in agony…….it feels like I am……...burning from the inside…'
'Here' the healer said, stirring a white powdery substance into a glass of water and handing it to Arlen. 'Drink this. It will ease the pain.'
Arlen reached forwards with shaking hands and took the glass, putting it to his lips and drinking.
Before he was even half finished, the glass slipped from his hands, and he threw his head back, screaming at the top of his lungs and pawing at his stomach. The healers all rushed to him, trying to hold him down as he thrashed around.
'What's happening?!' Farrell called to the healers in panic. 'What's wrong?!'
'It must be the poison' one healer shouted, another beside her bound a gag around Arlen's mouth to keep him silent, fighting him as he clawed desperately at her arms as she did so, leaving scratches in her skin which bled.
Farrell watched helplessly as his brother struggled, Arlen's eyes screwed tight shut, tears running from them.
His body began to convulse, he was heaving as if he were about to be sick.
'Quick!' the older healer barked. 'Take that off and let him go!'
The instant the gag was removed and the healers released him, Arlen rolled onto his side, being violently sick. Farrell's crippled hand went to his mouth in shock. Arlen had coughed up blood.
The room fell silent. Arlen stayed hanging off the edge of the bed, having fallen silent also. He gagged again, throwing up more blood, and the medicine he had ingested.
He rolled onto his back again, moaning in pain and clutching his stomach, shifting constantly, never staying still. He didn't speak, but began to cry. The healer beside him leant over him again, beginning to examine him. Arlen's blood dotted the front of her white dress.
The old healer turned from him silently, taking Farrell by the arm and marching with him out of the room.
'I must speak with you' she murmured to him, leaving the other healers to tend to Arlen and closing the door after them. 'Come with me to my office.'

'I know what ails him' the old healer said in a low tone a short while later. 'I'm afraid the news isn't good.'

‘Just tell me’ Farrell urged. ‘*Please*!’ his voice shook as he spoke, the horror of witnessing his brother in so much pain was more than he could bear.
‘Please’ Farrell whispered quietly now. ‘I have to know the truth.’
The old healer pursed her lips, she answered only reluctantly.
‘Your brother has been poisoned’ the older healer replied. ‘It is a particularly nasty poison, its purpose to cause as much suffering as possible before death. If the victim ingests anything, medicines and painkillers included, the poison in their system begins to react. They cannot even drink water.’
‘What can we do?’ Farrell whispered.
‘I'm sorry’ the healer bowed her head. ‘There is no cure. The best thing we can do is to end his suffering.’
‘No’ Farrell began to shake his head. ‘No….’
‘It’s the only way’ the healer spoke gently. ‘The other alternative…...’ she broke off. ‘It’s best if we end his suffering as soon as possible.’
‘I want to see him again’ Farrell said in a dead tone. ‘I have to.’
‘If you must. He is your brother’ she said. ‘It’s your call.’
Farrell rose from his seat slowly, moving away from the desk and leaving the office. He wandered down the corridor, reaching out to the wall for support.
He stopped at the end of the corridor, covering his mouth with a hand, his body hunched over as he fought back tears.
He glanced up, seeing the closed door to the room his brother lay in.
Farrell straightened, heading reluctantly over to it.
He opened the door and stepped in, closing the door quietly behind him. Inside the room was dark, there were no windows. His brother was on the bed utterly still, lying on his side curled up and holding his stomach.
Farrell approached him slowly, standing before him.
‘Arlen?’ he said in a low voice. ‘Can you hear me?’
Arlen did not move. Farrell knelt before him, reaching out a hand to gently shake him.
‘Arlen?’
He slowly opened his eyes, staring back at Farrell blearily. There was no recognition in him. His skin was sickly pale and beaded with sweat.
He stared at Farrell for a few seconds, his gaze out of focus, before closing his eyes again.
Farrell blinked several times, fighting back his tears, his face screwed up in grief.
‘Arlen’ he sobbed, grabbing his brother’s hand, it was cold to the touch. ‘Please…’ Farrell begged, ‘please don’t die……please don’t leave me……. I can’t live in this world without you….’ He bowed his head, tears streaming down his cheeks now. ‘There’s too much in my life I've already lost…. too much in my life that I regret….’ He leant forward, resting his forehead against Arlen’s. ‘I'm sorry Arlen’ he whispered. ‘I'm sorry this happened to you……I'm sorry I couldn’t protect you…’
He rose to his feet and headed out of the room, glancing back one last time at his brother through his tears, before he left.

He went away to be alone after that, his feet taking him to a secluded part of the temple, far from the other holy figures that wandered the silent corridors. He found himself a time later

in a small room, a private quarter meant for praying alone. Before him was a statue, a depiction of the goddess Kachi. A beautiful maiden, the mother of the sea, where it was believed all life began. Head thrown back, arms extended, she was surrounded by great eels which were enveloped around her scaly tail.
The door swung shut behind him, and Farrell listened to the echoing silence, alone with only himself, and the statue.
She was so beautiful, so perfect, like Ramana had been, like Amaia would have grown to be…. if she were….
Farrell's hand went to his mouth as he began to tremble. What if she *was* really dead, and they were searching for nothing? What if all their troubles had been in vain, what if Amaia had suffered, as Ramana had before she died? And now Arlen… his last remaining brother….
Farrell sunk to his knees, burying his face in his hands.
'Oh gods…...gods I've failed them all…!'
Tears ran from his eyes, he balled his fists, nails digging into his scalp as he ran his fingers through his hair.
'I'm alone…' he sobbed in despair, '…completely alone…'
He fell forwards, curled up on his hands and knees now with his face buried. Nothing else in the world mattered now. There was nothing left for him, no reason to live anymore.
'I've failed them all!' he wailed. 'Gods help me for all the wrong I've done…'
He sat back on his heels, crying opening, eyes red, cheeks streaked with tears.
'Gods help me….' he whispered.
He reached a shaking hand to the inside of his coat, pulling forth a knife.
He stared down at the clean and shining blade, gritting his teeth and rocking back on his heels again, staring about the small and silent room as if looking for a way out.
'Gods…' he sobbed, red faced. 'Oh gods…' he brushed his hair back, running his wrist across his forehead, now damp with sweat.
He forced himself to calm, to steady his breath. His body slumped, and his head hung. He lifted the knife again in a hand; then gripped the hilt with both hands.
The metal was cool in his touch.
He gritted his teeth, shoulders trembling.
He turned the knife over, so that the sharpened tip was pointed towards him. He pressed the tip to his skin, between his ribs and pointed up towards his heart, feeling the sharp sting of the blade as it dug into his flesh.
He drew a slow breath to steady himself, breathing slowly and deeply several times.

Farrell stopped suddenly; his body frozen.

The knife slipped from his hands and clattered to the floor. He threw his head up towards the statue Kachi.
His body trembled as he stared at the carved face, emotionless, with eyes unseeing.
Farrell bowed his head again. He didn't reach for the knife, but instead clapped his hands, fingers weaving together.
I've nothing to lose Farrell thought to himself as he stared at the floor beneath him.
'Please my goddess Kachi. Answer my prayers….'

He met with the healers a short time later.
‘Have you reached a decision?’ the old healer asked Farrell.
‘Yes’, he choked. ‘I think…...what you say is best.’
The old healer nodded sadly.
‘I will do it’ she said.
‘No’ Farrell spoke up. ‘I will…he is my brother after…...’ he trailed off.
‘Only if you're absolutely sure.’
‘Yes’ Farrell whispered. ‘I will…’ he held his breath, forcing himself to speak calmly. ‘I will do it.’
Farrell turned away, heading back to the room his brother lay.
He entered the room slowly, and faced his brother. The door closed behind him.
Arlen lay on his side in the same position as he had been before. Farrell watched him for the longest time, before reaching down to his belt, and unbuckling it, struggling with his crippled hand.
He pulled the belt free, holding it in one hand as he stepped slowly across the room towards Arlen, never taking his eyes from him.
He stood behind him, heart racing in his chest, palms sweating. His fingers twitched around the leather of the belt he held in his hand.
Farrell took a deep and steady breath to calm himself. He reached forwards, slipping the belt beneath Arlen’s neck as he lay, listening to the sound of the metal buckle clinking as he did so.
The belt was around Arlen’s neck now. Farrell hesitated, watching his brother closely. His heart was soaring now, the blood pumping loudly in his ears.
He took another steady breath; then pulled the belt. But before he could pull it tight, a hand stopped him. Arlen’s hand.
Farrell hesitated; eyes wide with shock as he stared down at Arlen.
Arlen rolled onto his back, staring up at Farrell calmly, with a stony expression. ‘You're trying to kill me?’ he whispered.
Farrell stepped back, the belt slipping from his hands as Arlen made to stand.
‘I've no strength to fight with you’ Arlen said to him as he rose. ‘Not now.’
‘I've no wish to fight with you’ Farrell whispered back, still in shock. ‘I thought…you were dying…’
Arlen looked at his own hands; then touched his own chest and stomach. ‘I hurt’ he whispered. ‘The pain….it was greater than I thought possible to endure. But it’s gone now…. now I feel nothing….’
Farrell fell to his knees before his brother, grabbing Arlen’s hands as he did.
‘I'm sorry brother’ he cried. ‘Please will you forgive me…. for all the wrong I've done? I'm sorry I neglected my family…...I’m sorry that I let Ramana die…...I’m sorry Amaia was taken, and that I didn’t look for her….’ he bowed his head, burying his face in his arms.

Arlen gazed down upon him as he stood over him, his expression unmoved. ‘Please’ Farrell whispered to him. ‘Please forgive me…...’ he lifted his head. ‘I have something for you’ he told Arlen quietly. ‘You might not remember…. but….here’ he said pulling a folded garment from beneath his coat. ‘This is yours. Do you remember it?’
Arlen looked down at the cloak Farrell offered him.
It was a beautiful garment, crimson in shade with vividly detailed patterns and swirls. It must have been very expensive to buy, and looked as if it had taken weeks to make by skilled hands.
‘This is the cloak you bought me…back when Brice was alive’ Arlen frowned in recognition. ‘You’ve carried it…. all this time?’
‘I…. was going to bury it with you…...but….’ he rose to his feet. ‘I don’t think that’s necessary anymore.’
Arlen spun the cloak around, draping it across his shoulders.
‘You look like a jester’ Farrell smiled weakly.
Arlen gave him a strange expression, one that Farrell couldn’t read.
Farrell turned away. ‘I should get the healers’ he said. ‘They would want to know you're ok.’

‘This is impossible’ the old healer said incredulous, as she held Arlen’s face in her hands, looking from one eye to the other, pulling his lower eyelid down to see the colour. ‘And you feel alright?’
‘Absolutely fine’ Arlen replied calmly.
‘Open your mouth’ the healer said, and Arlen did so. ‘Everything seems fine’ she spoke slowly, unconvinced at her own words.
She then took his wrist, feeling for a pulse, waiting for a few seconds, then touched his neck, feeling for another pulse. ‘Everything seems fine’ she said again.
The old healer straightened up, reaching to the table behind her. She poured a glass of water, then offered it to him. ‘A test?’ she said.
Arlen glanced at the water uncertainly, remembering what had happened last time. But he made himself forget that, and took it from her, bringing it to his lips.
Arlen drank; first half, then all of it. He handed the glass back to the healer silently, who took it from him, still staring at him in disbelief.
They waited. Nothing happened.
‘This is incredible’ she said to him. ‘This has never happened before. Never. You should have died’ she said, ‘you should not have survived this.’
‘I'm actually really hungry’ Arlen told her. ‘I would be grateful if someone could bring me something to eat.’
‘Of course,’ the healer said, fumbling over her words. ‘But for the time being I think you should stay here, just so we can keep an eye on you. Just in case.’
‘Fine’ Arlen answered flatly, ‘just as long as I get something to eat.’
Farrell who had watched the healer and Arlen the entire time, turned suddenly, almost sensing a presence behind him. In the open doorway behind them, looming in the corridor, he saw the most curious thing. A figure stood there, wearing a mask of a crow, but with large glass eyes like windows, behind them was nothing but shadow. The figure wore black all over, the cloak was black, the hood, even the gloves also.

The figure, noticing Farrell watching, glided away silently out of sight.
Farrell turned back to Arlen.
'I have to go' he said to him. 'There is something I have to do.'

Farrell wandered away, feeling happy, feeling as if there were new life within him, feeling purpose, and something he hadn't felt in a long time.
Hope.
His self from his moments of despair not long ago, felt like nothing but a distant memory, almost dream-like, as if it hadn't really happened. He ambled down the corridors of the large temple, smiling and nodding to the holy figures that glided past, experiencing his new self.
I never thought I would ever believe in the gods Farrell thought to himself, *but after this I am truly a changed man, and I believe I have changed for the better*.
He came to a large shrine in one of the many halls, a shrine in which a natural rock grew out from the earth, out of which was carved a depiction of the god Ezla, a man growing out of stone, with a bare chest and sharp claws. The statue was huge, reaching almost to the high ceiling above. It looked as if the temple had been constructed around this shrine, with the statue being at the very centre.
Farrell approached the statue. There were many candles burning brightly around it. Each candle represented a loved one that had passed, the fire, a prayer for the dead.
Farrell smiled warmly up at the statue, feeling a glow within his heart. He bowed his head, and began to pray.
Please, my god Ezla. Bring my daughter back to me; she is my heart's desire. Let her be found safe and alive and happy. This is all I ask of you.
He opened his eyes when he heard movement by his side. Glancing around, he saw a woman nearby. He watched as she took a candle from a box, one of the many dotted about the shrine, and lit it from a flame of a nearby candle already burning. She placed it amongst the others, bowing her head and placing her hands together. She began to whisper.
'Who do you pray for?' Farrell asked her.
The holy woman, dressed in white with her hair covered, and a blue sash tied around her waist, turned to face him.
'A friend' the woman replied. 'A very good friend, who died protecting me. I miss him dearly. I will never forget what he did for me.'
She stepped back and considered Farrell then.
'Who are you?' she asked him. 'Are you a traveller?'
'Traveller? Yes, I suppose I am' Farrell answered.
'My name is Layla' the woman said. 'I saw you from a distance.' She smiled at him. 'What do *you* pray for when you speak to the gods?'
'For things to be as they should' Farrell replied simply.
'Don't we all wish the same' Layla beamed.
She nodded to Farrell, before leaving the hall.
Farrell watched her go, before his attention drifted back to the great statue before, craning his head back to its tip, so tall that it was.
He watched the statue for several minutes, deep in thought. And then he heard a scream.

Farrell wheeled around, instinctively running towards the source of the noise. Through the hall beyond the archway, he ran. He saw the healer Layla, being dragged by a soldier who held her by the wrist. Layla tried to resist, pulling back from the soldier, her efforts though in vain.

A memory flashed in Farrell's mind then, one of Annabel. He remembered the day they had first taken her with them, the day she had been confronted by soldiers. He remembered how they had grabbed Annabel by the wrist, and dragged her.

On that day the others had rushed to her aid. On this day, Farrell did the same.

He charged towards the soldier, grabbing a heavy candle holder as he went and swinging it as hard as he could at the soldier, striking him across the head.

The soldier immediately let go of Layla, rounding on him and snarling in fury.

'You bastard' he growled, stepping towards Farrell and whipping out a small sword from his belt. 'I'll kill you for that.'

The soldier lunged for Farrell, but he was young and inexperienced. Farrell was able to disarm him easily in seconds, driving the sword through his throat, and watching him bleed to death as he threw him to the floor.

Instantly cries of terror from the holy men and women sounded all around.

'Defiled! Defiled! Our temple had been defiled!'

They began to scatter, the woman Layla had stumbled back and fallen in shock at what she had seen. The dead soldier lay still bleeding, and Layla stared up at Farrell now in fear.

Farrell turned to her, the pieces in his mind falling into place. He glanced back at the soldier at his feet, his armour bearing the crest of royalty.

Farrell's heart stopped in his chest, recognising the symbol as the same one, not as the king wore, but as the prince wore. A wolf running up a steep mountainside.

He glanced back at the holy woman at his feet, holding his breath.

'It cannot be' he whispered, as the sudden realisation came crashing down upon him. Everything he had been fighting for since he left his home, all the pain and uncertainty he had suffered since he had first had the dream that set him on his quest. Since the very moment she had been taken when she was a child over a decade ago. Everything in his life, everything, had been driving him towards this point. Towards finding her. He had failed his wife, but he would not fail his daughter. Not again.

He fell to his knees, too weak with shock to bear it.

'My prayers have been answered…'

'What?' the woman gasped uncertainly, her chest rising and falling as she breathed deeply, still in shock at what had just happened.

'Please…' Farrell breathed, reaching a shaking hand towards her. 'Please let it be you…my daughter.'

Part 3

Chapter Forty-Nine
The Man on Green Wings

‘The petals wither and fall from their flower. The leaves from the trees, once beautifully they danced in the wind, now fall to the earth as only dead waste. The grass once green and lush now fades away, covered by a blanket of frost. Another year has passed’ the king said turning from the window in the study, ‘and another year I am forced to endure life without her. You have a chance to do a good thing. Why not make it so?’
‘There is nothing I can do’ the Weather Maker repeated for the hundredth time. ‘I think it’s time to face reality. Come out of your grieving. You have to face the fact that she may never wake.’
‘No’ the king repeated. ‘I will never stop trying to save her.’
‘Then many will continue to suffer because of your unwillingness to face the truth.’
‘If you will not help me’ the king said. ‘Perhaps there are others who can.’
‘So what are you going to do? Continue to kidnap until you are old and tired you’ve lost your mind?’
‘I will do whatever is necessary’ the king answered.
‘This meaningless quest will drive you mad’ the woman answered, ‘if it hasn’t already done so.’
‘I will never be mad’ the king answered simply, ‘if I have her.’
‘Then make the most of your sanity’ the Weather Maker stared coolly. ‘And I say for the last time. There is *nothing* I can do.’
The king glared, controlling his anger well despite his rage and despair.
‘Then I have no need for you.’
The king approached the Weather Maker sitting in the chair, lifting his hands to grab her.

Instead of showing fear, the woman turned her head to look behind her, speaking to the figure that only she could see.
‘This is my last chance, isn’t it? I won’t ever come back again.’
‘If there was anything I could do to save you...’ the figure answered, not even trying to hold back his grief, ‘then I would do it. But I can’t help you this time……I’m sorry…’
The woman looked forwards to face the king again, but continued to speak to the figure behind her.
‘Please’ she said to the figure. ‘Do not be sad for me. I've lived my life. Find someone younger and protect them. This is my final wish.’
She bowed her head with a smile, closing her eyes as if content. When she opened them again, she stared calmly at the king, and waited for his hands to close around her neck.

The figure watched helplessly as the Weather Maker was slowly strangled. Her body slumped in her chair seconds later and she became still, lifeless.
The king let out a breath, turning mournfully away from the woman. The figure who stood behind her glared with pure hatred at the king, in his head swearing vengeance.

The figure walked past the king and across the room. He spared one last glance back to the woman he had known for so long, feeling like he had lost a piece of himself. But with her dead, there was nothing left for him here now, and he remembered her last words.

Find someone younger and protect them. This is my final wish

The figure released his delicate wings. He tip-toed quietly to the window, and placing his hand upon the sill he climbed up. Leaping forwards, he fluttered through the air and away from the tower, and that dreaded place that had become a hell.

Sarah giggled, shoving her friend playfully.

'Stop that' her friend scolded, grinning and pushing her back. 'You have to serve the lady now; you wouldn't want to keep her waiting, would you?'

Sarah set the tray, with tea, sugar and a single cup and saucer. Before leaving the kitchen, she composed herself, taking a deep breath and bowing her head, before picking up the tray and walking out. She regained her submissive quiet character, as the servant she was expected to be, and walked quietly down the long corridor towards the room where the lady waited.

She approached the woman, who as usual wore the most beautiful of dresses. Today it was royal blue and deep in shade.

Sarah placed the tray carefully on the low table before the woman, keeping her head low as she one by one put the cup and saucer and the sugar and the tea neatly on the table. Before she knew it, the woman's hand shot out, grabbing her by the arm. Sarah gasped in shock at the sudden movement, staring back at the woman and making eye contact with her for the first time in months. Her heart was pained to see the woman's eyes were deep with sorrow and full of despair.

'Please' the woman begged. 'Please just speak to me!'

Sarah held the woman's gaze for far too long. Several seconds later, when Sarah had recovered from the shock of the woman's suddenly outburst, she realised herself. Taking the woman by the hand and prising her fingers open so that her arm was freed again. Sarah averted her eyes from the woman, returning to habit and staring at the ground.

Sarah kept her head bowed low as she rose, turning swiftly away and scurrying off with the tray clutched to her chest. She closed the door with a snap, leaving the woman, once again, alone.

She tried not to think about it, but the guilt and sadness gnawed at her each time she was around that woman. She could only imagine how she must be feeling, to be so alone. What did all this service and good food matter when you had no one to share it with? The woman likely did not appreciate the beauty of the home she lived in. The large and lavish halls and glorious designs and colours of the mansion she had spent the majority of her life in all meant nothing, when you were trapped by them. Sarah found it sad to think, that despite being a lowly servant who spent most of her life grovelling to her superiors (which included everyone besides her own family) that she was perhaps richer than that woman. In reality, despite first glance, the woman had nothing, and the servant had everything.

Sarah tried not to think about it, for there was nothing she could do. She wished sometimes that she could go away and work somewhere else, so she did not have to see the woman's sadness and misery. But she worked where she was ordered, as a servant does.

Sarah closed the door behind her, returning to the kitchen in the servant's quarters. She danced up behind one of the girls who was chopping carrots, and poked her hard either side of her waist with a sharp prod.
The girl squeaked, leaping up into the air.
'Sarah!' she squealed. 'Don't scare me like that; you know how I hate it.'
'But I love the look on your face when you jump' Sarah giggled, tickling her friend. 'It's so amusing for me.'
'Be careful' her friend warned indicating the knife she held. 'You wouldn't want to get cut now.'
Sarah kissed her friend on the cheek, sailing away happily with her arms out as she glided across the kitchen towards some of her other friends, who were working feverishly on the next meal they would prepare for the important woman. Sarah immediately began to engage in conversation with them, talking and laugh with her friends, completely unaware of being watched.

The important woman had opened the door a crack, hearing the animated conversations from within. Looking into the kitchen she saw the woman who had served her tea bustling about, far too busy to notice her. She watched them all closely, despite being servants, and working for so many hours in the day, they did not seem tired. In fact, they seemed happy and lively. Herself, with so little to do, grew bored very easily, and spent long hours of the day just sleeping to pass the time, be it night or day. She woke when she felt like it, having nothing to look forward to in the day, not ever. The books she read could always wait; and the views outside her window would always be there. Beautiful though they were, over the years, they had lost their appeal.
The important woman closed the door sadly, turning away from the sound of laugher with an ache in her heart. How she longed to have someone to care for, and who cared for her in return. How she longed to meet someone who would speak to her, smile at her, even look her in the eye for more than a brief moment. But there was no one; there had not been anyone, not since the days when she was younger. Not since that day she had been taken.
She had grown up very quickly after that.
The important woman glided down the halls, away from the kitchens and towards the quieter rooms in which she lived. And then, she began to sing.
A heavenly voice which echoed through the many halls in which she wandered, sounding eerie, though no less beautiful. She drifted through the building, her home, singing as she did so in a truly angelic voice, singing in a foreign language, sounding almost otherworldly.
She continued with her mantra, her notes long, drawn out and sad. She came to one of the windows, slowing to a stop before it and gazing out at the horizon beyond her reach. She sang her last notes, light and beautiful, before stretching into silence.

She gave a deep sigh, eyes glazed over; then stiffened suddenly at an unexpected noise, a rustling just outside the window. She straightened, becoming slightly nervous.
There came the rustling again.

She stepped tentatively forwards, uncertain as to what she might find. Perhaps it was just a squirrel she thought, or a bird.
But when she reached the window and leaned out to see, it was not a bird she saw, nor a squirrel, but a man, or what appeared to be at first glance a man.
She gasped and started back, withdrawing quickly from the window in shock.
The man (or so it appeared to be) had been balanced precariously on a very thin ledge outside the window and just out of sight. He had grinned at her as she glanced him, balanced carefully as he was. The ground was a considerable distance below him, to fall would surely kill a man. But he was not a man, as the important woman was about to find out. His hand reached around the edge of the open window, and she watched as he clambered in, maintaining at least some level of dignity as he did so.
He did not acknowledge her at first, but straightened up, brushing away leaves and dust from his person; much like a cat would preen and fuss over its appearance. And then he looked at her. And then he smiled.
'Hello' he said.
The woman was so stunned at his sudden and unexpected appearance, and the fact he had willingly looked at her and chosen to smile, that it took her many seconds to realise he had actually and willingly spoken to her.
'Uh' she said.
'Is that how you greet all new people?' he asked her teasingly, leaning towards her and placing his hands on his hips. '*Uh*.'
'Eeeeee.'
'Oh, so now we've progressed onto *eeee's,* how lovely.' He flashed her a mischievous grin, baring his perfect white teeth in a self-confident manner.
He was lean, young in appearance and slim-faced with almost feminine features. His slick black hair was handsome, and a long fringe hung low over his face.
'My name is White Feather' he said to her, flicking back his fringe to see her better. He bowed to her, taking her by the hand and kissing the back in a way she had only read about in books. 'I am a friend' he told her. 'I come with intentions of peace; I will never harm you. I am an ally.'
When she didn't answer, he looked up at her, releasing her hand slowly and straightening up.
'Dare I ask' he began, 'the young lady her name?'
She gathered herself mentally, taking a deep breath before speaking.
'Amaia.'
'So, the lady can speak' White Feather glowed. 'And might I say what a beautiful name you have.'
'Who are you?' Amaia asked White Feather.
'Well,' he bowed his head. 'I am sure I already told you my name. Perhaps you should be asking, *what* am I?'
'I don't understand.'
'Then permit me to explain.'
He closed his eyes; smiling as he revealed four, long thin glass-like wings that grew from his back in a glow of white light. They were beautiful, with black veins running down them, looking almost like spider web patterns, or the patterns on a leaf. And for some reason, at the

sight of them, Amaia suddenly felt very safe around this character. She felt that she could trust him.
'Amaia' White Feather gleamed. 'We have a lot to catch up on.'

'So, tell me about yourself.' Amaia said as the two walked side by side through the many rooms. 'Where did you come from?'
'Where did I come from?' White Feather repeated. 'I came…' his eyes grew distant, 'from a place far away, a terrible place. Before I met you, I served another.'
'You *serve* me now?' Amaia asked curiously.
White Feather grinned, turning to face her. He placed a hand across his chest, dropping to a knee and bowing low. 'For hundreds of years, my kind have served your kind, we are your guardians and servants.' White Feather opened his eyes, looking up to her again. 'My kind are rare, our only purpose in existence it to protect and watch over you.' White Feather fixed Amaia with a deep stare, his body frozen in position. 'I will always be loyal to you; I will never waver. Wherever you go, I go. I will obey your every wish, no matter what. Even if you asked me to take my own life, I would do so willingly, and with happiness.'
'I would never ask of such a thing' Amaia breathed.
'Then what would you ask of me?'
Amaia reached forwards, holding White Feather gently by his shoulders and lifting him to his feet again.
'I ask you only to be happy' she told him. 'And I would never ask anything wrong of you.'
'Then let me serve you' White Feather begged her. 'That would make me very happy.'
'Then stay here with me' Amaia said. 'For as long as you want.'
White Feather glowed at this. He held his hands together over his heart, breathing a heavy sigh. 'Oh, Amaia, we're going to be the best of friends, I just know it.'
Amaia smiled at this. 'But…' she said, 'what happened to the one you served before?'
A dark look crossed White Feather's face, and Amaia for a moment wondered if she had been wrong to ask. But White Feather was willing to answer.
'She was murdered' White Feather hissed, with raw venom in his voice. He snarled then, and Amaia for the briefest of moments was afraid of him. But then White Feather relaxed his body, letting out a deep breath. 'I knew her' White Feather began, 'for a very long time. But' he went on, 'before she died, she asked me to find someone to protect, someone like you' he said, raising his head to her. 'I never realised I would find you in such a beautiful place.'
'This place?' Amaia said sadly, holding herself. 'This is a prison'
'But it is a wonderful prison' White Feather sang, throwing his arms out dramatically. 'There are worse places you could be after all.'
'I know' Amaia mumbled. 'I've spent most of my life here alone in these rooms, but I've learnt a lot about the world through books and such. I've read of all kinds of things, good and bad. I have learnt about prisons that exist, and have existed, they are terrible places I know…but…at least.....people in those prisons have company.'
'It's alright now' White Feather told her. 'We have each other.'
Amaia paused. Her eyes drifted past White Feather, and to his wings behind him.
'They look so fragile.'

‘Trust me, they are not as delicate as they look’ White Feather winked. ‘Would you like to touch them?’
White Feather turned around so that Amaia could reach them. She ran her finger lightly over the black veins in his wings.
‘They're so beautiful’ Amaia breathed. ‘I wish I had wings just like that.’
‘I would give them to you if I could’ White Feather smiled. ‘But I'm afraid they are attached to me.’
Amaia giggled. ‘The way you speak,’ she said to him, ‘it’s very strange.’
‘Do I amuse you?’ White Feather asked, placing his hands on his hips. He twirled, flicking his hair back as he did so and facing Amaia again.
‘You know, this place is really big’ White Feather said, changing the subject. ‘I don’t think I've seen a dwelling with so many rooms so large. I must say, you certainly have a lot of space to wander in.’
‘It is quite big’ Amaia agreed. ‘I grew up in a large home. But this is far larger than the home my father owned.’
‘Your father?’ White Feather asked. ‘Tell me more about your father, does he live here?’
‘No’ Amaia smiled sadly. ‘He is far away.’ Her gaze drifted towards one of the windows, beyond which was a world she did not know.’
‘Does he come to visit you?’
‘No’ Amaia sighed miserably. ‘I'm sure he doesn’t even know where I am.’
‘What do you mean?’
‘I was stolen from my family’ Amaia explained, ‘when I was very young. I have lived here alone in these empty halls for perhaps ten years, maybe more. I have lost track of the days…these past few years.’
‘That’s terrible’ White Feather cried, looking genuinely distressed at this. It was as if when she spoke the words, he felt her pain and sorrow within him. ‘I felt your sadness from afar’ White Feather told her. ‘That is what drew me to you. Weather Makers and fairies like myself have an ancient bond which dates back to long ago, longer than anyone can remember.’
‘Weather Maker?’ Amaia repeated. ‘That is the first time I have heard that word. Is that what I am?’
‘Yes’, White Feather bowed. ‘It is.’
‘My mother was a Weather Maker’ Amaia said, ‘she passed her gift onto me. If you could call it a gift.’
Amaia raised both her hands before her, staring at her open palms.
‘Weather Maker…’ she said.

Chapter Fifty
Nostalgia

‘Hey look!’ Amaia called running from her mother’s side. ‘Butterflies!’

Amaia leapt forwards, squealing and giggling in delight as she chased them. She jumped, trying to catch the butterflies fluttering about, but they lifted higher into the sky and out of her reach.

Amaia smiled up towards them as they disappeared from sight. She turned; the hem of her dress swirled as she did so. Amaia crouched, running her fingers through the grass and picking a flower from one of the many scattered about. Amaia lifted the flower to her lips, smelling the beautiful scent.

'It's so pretty' Amaia said, 'I wish I could keep it. I wish flowers would stay pretty forever.'

She drew the flower away from her, concentrating hard. The flower began to whiten. Frost grew down from the petals and down the stem, enveloping the whole flower in an icy glaze.

Someone suddenly grabbed her arm, wheeling her around. The flower slipped from her fingers and fell, the frost quickly melting away as it lay in the grass. Amaia stared up into the face of her mother, who was livid with rage.

'Never do that again!' Ramana hissed through gritted teeth, shaking her violently. 'Do you understand me? Never, ever again!'

Amaia stared up at her mother in utter shock and disbelief.

'Promise me' Ramana whispered, tightening her grip on Amaia's shoulders. 'Promise me you will never do that again.'

She was hurting her as her nails dug into her arm, but Amaia didn't try to resist.

'I promise' Amaia whispered back.

'What's wrong?' Farrell asked as he approached them.

Ramana released Amaia, turning to face him.

'Nothing' Ramana replied sternly, glaring at her daughter who shrank uncertainly under her mother's gaze. 'I was just teaching Amaia a very valuable lesson.'

Farrell shrugged this off, and continued. 'Look Amaia' he said, kneeling as he produced an item hidden on his person.

Amaia glowed at the sight of it.

'It's a little person' Farrell explained, dancing it through the air to demonstrate. 'We could make more of them together if you like.'

Amaia snatched it from him greedily, but Farrell did not tell her off for this. Amaia stared wide eyed down at the little toy man made of straw and twig.

'We could make a whole town' Amaia said.

'I've just had a good idea' Farrell said enthusiastically at her thought. 'We could make this town, with all the people that you know, and the buildings. And we could make little mini fences for the fields.'

'And we could make your scary horse too' Amaia said bouncing up and down excitedly. 'I'm so happy! Could you help me make them? Pleeeeeze!'

'She was furious when she saw me using magic. I've never seen her so angry before. My mother never raised her voice to me, not ever. But on that day, I thought that she would hit me. Amaia hugged herself at the memory.

'I was frightened.'

White Feather watched her silently as she told her story. There was a sadness about him as he listened, a strange sort of understanding, like he had heard a similar story before.
'I have not used my magic since that day' Amaia continued. 'But perhaps by then it was too late.' She sighed, turning away from White Feather. 'I've thought of it a lot in the years I've spent here. Perhaps on that day someone other than my mother saw me. Maybe it was one of my father's soldiers, or perhaps a traveller or merchant that was passing through the town. I must have been seen by someone, because that was the only time in my life that I have ever used my magic… and I've been afraid to ever since.' Amaia's lip began to quiver. 'It was not long after when……when….'
She took a steady breath.
'What happened?' White Feather asked tentatively. 'Was that the day you were taken?'
Amaia's eyes glazed over.
'That was the day' she finally continued after a time, 'that my life changed…'

Ramana sighed wearily, resting with her chin on her hands. For some time Amaia played, completely distracted with her own games.
'Hey look! Mother look!'
Ramana lifted her head, straightening up to see her daughter lying on the ground on her belly with her arms and legs sprawled out awkwardly.
'Look!' she gleamed, crawling forwards. 'I'm a beetle!'
Ramana chuckled to herself, cheering up a little. She rose from the stump and glided over to her daughter, kneeling behind her and picking her up. She nuzzled into her neck, tickling her. Amaia squealed happily, wriggling in her mother's arms.
'I love you so much' Ramana said to her. 'You mean everything to me. My precious treasure.'
'You mean more to me' Amaia giggled. 'I love you like a swallow loves honey.'
'What?' Ramana chuckled. 'Swallows don't eat honey.'
'How do you know?' Amaia asked her. 'Have you ever followed one around?'
'No' Ramana smiled to her daughter. 'Of course I haven't. I can't fly.'
Ramana let go of her daughter, drifting away and leaving Amaia to her games of being a beetle, her mind beginning to drift again.
'Mother?' Amaia spoke up a moment later.
Ramana turned to her daughter who lay on the ground with her head turned to the side, her ear against the earth.
'Do you hear that noise?' Amaia asked. Her voice was uncertain.
'What is it?' Ramana said.
'Rumbling.'
Ramana lifted her head, stiffening at the sound of falling hooves. The thundering of the horses steps signalled the swift arrival of many.
'Amaia' her mother hastened, 'come quickly.'
Amaia picked herself off the ground, running to her mother's side. Ramana marched quickly back down the road and towards the town, walking with her arm around her daughter's

shoulders and head down. Behind them the horses approached. Ramana pulled her daughter tightly to her as the horses descended upon them, hoping that they would simply pass them by. But the great beasts walled them in, trapping them from either side, turning around and blocking their path at the front, as more horses closed the net behind them.

Ramana stared up in alarm as she and her daughter were surrounded by rows of great black stallions, tall and mighty war horses, and the men that rode them who were dressed in richly dyed silks embroidered with intricate designs. Their armour was lined in silver, and appeared to be designed to be both showy and functional. In the centre of each of their breast plates, was a depiction of a wolf swallowing the moon. The kings crest.

These were the king's men.

Ramana had no time to wonder what they were doing here; too wracked with fear and uncertainty. She watched as one of the men, the only one wearing a helmet that covered his face, dismounted his horse.

Ramana clutched her daughter tighter to her, staring wide-eyed and unblinking as the soldier took three steps towards her. He stopped, leaving a considerable gap between them, and speaking in a hoarse voice, he made his demand.

'Give us the girl.'

Ramana's heart plummeted to the ground as she realised he meant her daughter; and she clutched the frightened Amaia even tighter, holding her protectively.

'Hand her over' the soldier spoke with calm cruelty, 'or we kill you.'

And then Ramana said something that surprised all of them.

'If you want her, come and get her.'

Ramana could not see the face of the man that stood before her, but knew by his demeanour he must have been surprised. The soldiers surrounding them all glanced to each other, a few sharking smirks.

The soldier standing before her cocked his head, regarding her serenely.

'Very well' he said.

He took a step towards her, but suddenly froze. Ramana fixed her attention on him, concentrating hard. A few of the mounted soldiers around began to fidget, waiting for the man to do something. And then, the helmeted soldier fell forwards. He collapsed and hit the ground; the fallen leaves which covered the forest floor softened the thud of his helmet and armour upon the earth. But he was already stone dead.

A few of the soldiers cried out in alarm, but before any of them could act, there was a great bolt of lightning that came from the sky, striking the ground between them. The sudden flash of light and the great crack sent the horses into a blind panic. Many screamed in terror, several of them rearing up, throwing their riders from their backs. The wall surrounding Ramana and her daughter broke, and Ramana made for the gap.

She ran.

Amaia struggled to keep up with her mother's long legs as she was pulled along by her wrist; quickly she was tiring and began to stumble.

'Hurry!' Ramana cried in panic back to her.

She heard sounds swiftly catching them up from behind; one of the soldiers had managed to get his horse under control, and was tearing after them.

'RUN AMAIA!'

Ramana released her daughter's wrist, halting on the spot and turning to face the danger, not even glancing to make sure her daughter had listened.
She watched as the mighty stallion galloped towards her, waiting for the opportune moment. Only when the black beast was nearly upon her, towering over her, did a great rift appear in the road between them. A loud crack and a sharp upwards gust of wind caused the horse to panic and rear up, though the stallion didn't run away. The soldier slid sideways off the saddle, landing hard on the ground.
He rolled swiftly and came to his knees, drawing his sword from his scabbard in one rapid movement. Before Ramana had time to think, before she had time to act and move to protect herself, he thrust the blade forwards, driving it right through her breastbone and into her heart.
She gasped in shock as the soldier rose to his feet, still holding the handle of the sword. When he was standing, he jerked the blade sharply back. Red blossomed from the wound in her chest. Ramana stumbled, and fell back, hitting the forest floor and gazing up into the sky behind the branches swaying above her.
And that was the last things she saw, before she died.

The soldier wiped his sword clean; turning to glance at the riding coming up from behind him. Cantering past, the rider urged his stallion onwards, heading for the young girl still running away.
Amaia screamed as the colossal horse ran around her and blocked her path, tossing its head and whinnying. She edged back away from it, terrified of such a beast that towered over her.
She was grabbed from behind by one of the men, and held tightly. Amaia screamed again, and tried to struggle against the beefy muscular arm that held her. But her efforts were futile. She could barely move at all.
'Quick' came a voice. 'Get her on a horse and let's get out of here.'
'But what about Ulfrid?' said the man who held her.
'He's dead. Now let's hurry and get back to the king before anything else happens.'
Amaia was put in the saddle atop one of the horses. Immediately fearing tumbling to the ground far below her, she held tightly into the horse's mane, tears of fear welling up in her eyes as she began to shake uncontrollably. The soldier who had held her climbed into the saddle behind, placing an arm around her so she had nowhere to go. Amaia felt frightened in the power of this man, this stranger. This soldier.
With his other hand the man held the reins of the black stallion, tapping his heels into the horse's flank. The horse obeyed his command, quickly increasing speed into a gallop. Water streamed down Amaia's cheeks as the wind stung her eyes, mixed with tears of fear and confusion. Amaia was gripped by a sudden sense of unreality, and for a moment, she didn't know where she was.
Amaia held on, and waited for what her fate might bring, all the while she thought of her mother, and wondered where she was and what had happened. She had kept running as her mother had told, and did not look back.
She had not seen her die.

A group of men, doubling in number to those that had kidnapped Amaia, lay in wait some distance down the road.
'They're heading this way' one of the scouts said to their leader who was named Tristan. 'They'll be here in minutes.'
Tristan rubbed his palms together nervously, signalling behind him to indicate the other men to keep silent. The horses that had carried them stood further back, hidden from view from the road. They shifted, ears twitching and nickering to each other. The men were lying in wait upon the lip of the hill, a spot Tristan had chosen that overlooked the road. A fine place for an ambush.
Tristan glanced up to the small hill opposite him on the other side of the road, seeing more of his men crouched low. The dark green and brown mottled clothes they wore broke up their silhouettes and deemed them near enough invisible in the forest.
'Excellent' Tristan muttered to himself. He took a deep breath, speaking to the archer beside him.
'Now listen very carefully.'
The archer's eyes instantly glazed over.
'You are to aim for the rider who has her. Aim to kill him. But do not *hit the girl. I repeat, do* not *hit her.'*
'Understood your highness.'
'They should be here within seconds' Tristan went on; glancing down to the road in the direction the riders were expected to arrive from. 'Keep a sharp eye, and do not hit the girl.'
'Understood your highness' the archer repeated.
Tristan tensed suddenly, crouching low as he heard the sound of horses approaching.
'Here they come' he whispered to the archer beside him who crouched low as Tristan had done. 'Are you ready?' Tristan asked as the archer pulled an arrow from his quiver.
The archer nocked the arrow, drawing back the string with a muscular arm and perfect position.
'Be careful' Tristan reminded. 'And don't hit the girl.'
The riders were drawing closer, coming into view and travelling fast.
The archer narrowed his eyes, searching for the rider who had Amaia.
Spotted.
The riders approached the ambush, and ran past. The archer rose from his position swiftly, waiting a split second before releasing the arrow.
The finest archer in the kingdom did not often miss his target. The man fell dead from his horse, and for the first time, the girl he carried could be seen clearly.
Tristan's heart froze as he saw her, and for a moment, words were lost to him as the riders below them began to panic and scatter in confusion and alarm. And then Tristan remembered himself. Rising and standing tall he lifted his sword, crying out the signal to attack.
A great swarm of men descended upon the unsuspecting riders and slaughtered them. Most were killed by the archers before swords clashed, and by the time it was over, Tristan had not lost a single man.
He panted heavily, brow beaded with sweat as he looking about him, realising it was all over.
'Good work men' he called. 'And good work Cyan.'

The archer who had shot the first man gave a nod mutely to Tristan.
Tristan held his breath again, growing evermore nervous as his sights rested upon the frightened girl, still sitting upon the giant black stallion.
He wanted to rush up to her, and sweep her up in his arms, and tell her everything was alright. But he dared not scare her further.
'Poor child' he whispered as she trembled. 'We did not intend for you to see such violence. But it was the only way.'
He had planned ahead of time however, for a friendly presence to greet her and make her feel safe and at ease. A woman.
'Beatrice!' he called. 'Beatrice?'
'I'm coming my lord' came a female voice.
A plump woman came plodding over the lip of the hill, struggling down to the road below she made her way laboriously towards the horse Amaia sat. Stepping over the dead bodies with distain in her expression, she moved holding the bottom of her skirt up so that it wouldn't get brushed in blood. She stopped beside the stallion, smiling widely up at Amaia as the beast stood still.
'Hello child. There's no need to be afraid, we are not here to hurt you. We are your friends.'
'Where's mother?' Amaia sobbed, her voice breaking.
'Shhh' Beatrice cooed. 'Poor baby. Come down from that horse. I'll look after you.'
Amaia did not have time to protest however, as Beatrice stood on her tip toes to lift Amaia off the horse, holding her under her arms.
Amaia was placed on the ground, staring up uncertainly at the fat smiling face of this stranger.
Tristan approached from behind Beatrice, staring intently down at Amaia in a way she didn't like.
'Gods you look just like your mother' he breathed. 'Amaia…'
'Do not worry child' Beatrice told her, taking her hand and leading her away. 'You will be taken somewhere safe and looked after.'
'I want to go home' Amaia pleaded. 'Where is father?'
'No dear' Beatrice said to her. 'I'm afraid you can't go back home. It's not safe for you.'
Tristan watched as Beatrice led Amaia away, escorted silently by several of his men, armed with swords and bows. They mounted their own horses, chestnut mares.
'Be careful' he told all of them. 'Get there quickly and safely, and don't stop for anything.'
'Don't worry my lord' Beatrice said back to him, sitting atop a horse with Amaia in the saddle before her. 'She's in safe hands now.'
Tristan watched the small band ride away, feeling a sense of longing, and a strong desire to follow them. But he had other concerns.
'Your highness.'
The voice snapped Tristan out of his thoughts.
'Yes?' he replied to one of his scouts.
'There is something you might want to see further down the road, in the direction the riders came from.'

Tristan mounted his pure white mare, setting off down the road he followed the scout. When he reached the place, there was sorrow in his heart. A dead soldier lay there, his face covered by a helmet, and further down the road, a woman who had been murdered.
Tristan shook his head, dismounting to examine the dead soldier briefly. He had no injuries on him, and nothing to indicate what might have killed him.
'How do you think he died?' a scout, one of several that examined the body asked.
'I've seen this before' Tristan replied solemnly, 'people dropping dead for no obvious reason.' He stared down at the man. 'My mother has done this to people herself, before she…' he broke off.
'What happened to him?' the scout asked.
'His heart' Tristan went on, 'has frozen.'
'Frozen?' the scout exclaimed. 'How could such a thing happen?'
Tristan glanced sadly at the woman lying further down the road.
'They must have thought Amaia did this.'
He approached the woman lying on her back, sorrow overflowing within him.
'Tragic' he said. 'It's so tragic; to see one so innocent, suffer such a cruel end.'
The wound in her chest had stopped bleeding, and the blood was beginning to crust.
'She's so beautiful' Tristan sighed gloomily.
He bowed his head, sending over her a quick prayer, so that her soul might reach the afterlife with ease.
'Come' he said abruptly to his men when he was done. 'We should leave.'

Chapter Fifty-One
Grief

Amaia was on the ground now, holding her knees up against her chest with her face buried in her folded arms.
'I always thought my mother might still be alive' she sobbed, 'that I might see her someday. I never found out what happened to her. I didn't know if she had been hurt...' Amaia brushed away her tears, rising again to her feet. 'I was so terrified' she said. 'I remember hearing the blood pumping in my ears as I ran. For years after I hoped that she would find me, that I would see her again someday.'
'Perhaps she *is* still alive' White Feather offered. 'Perhaps she's at your home…waiting for you.'
'For years I wished to believe that.' Amaia turned back to White Feather with a sad smile. 'It's the one thing that's kept me going for all these years. The thought of seeing my parents again. In all my life I've never wanted anything else in the world more, than to be reunited with them both, and to tell them how much I love them, and how much I have missed them.' Amaia let out a heavy sigh. 'But…' she continued sadly. 'The years have stretched on, and on. I have often thought of escape from this place. But there *is* no way to escape. The servants have to pass through many many doors to leave this place, and there are guards all around. They stand around like empty suits of armour, with their big helmets, and sharp

weapons, their faces always covered…. I believe they are here for my protection as much as they are for my imprisonment. I have thought of escape, but I have not been able to go even as far as attempting it. This palace is a fortress. I'm not even allowed outside, and all the rooms I am allowed in…well…you would not survive a fall from any of the windows. And even if I could somehow get outside……the gardens are guarded also, and the gates around this property are tall.'
'There really is no way to get out of here?' White Feather asked her.
Amaia held her hands behind her back as she surveyed him, tilting her head to the side, letting her jet-black hair fall over her shoulder. 'I believe not' she told him.
'I can leave however' White Feather told her. 'I could do so whenever I want.'
'I do not have wings like you do' Amaia replied sorrowfully. 'How jealous of you I am right now.'
'I could find your parents' White Feather told her. 'You only need to tell me where to go.'
Amaia hesitated at this thought. And for the briefest of moments, hope flickered within her, before being quickly extinguished.
'But…' she began, 'I don't know where they are.'
'What do you mean?'
'I was very young when I was taken' Amaia explained. 'I know it sounds silly, but I didn't know where exactly I lived.'
'I'm sure there must be a map somewhere in this place' he told her confidently. 'We can work it out together.' He winked at her. 'Is there a map?'
'There is. But I don't know if I could find it, even on a map. I've tried before, and failed.'
'Well,' White Feather grinned slyly moving closer to her, 'before you didn't have me.'
Amaia smirked. 'That's true.'
'So' White Feather began thoughtfully, 'was it a city in which you lived? Or a town? Or perhaps a small village?'
'It was a town' Amaia replied, 'a small town.'
'Ok' White Feather nodded encouragingly. 'See? We're getting somewhere.' He fell silent in thought. 'Were you by the sea?'
'No' Amaia spoke slowly. 'Not immediately. If you rode a short distance though you would reach it.'
'Any mountains?'
'Not for miles away' Amaia shook her head, 'but you could see them from my home. Our house was built above the others in the town, upon a hill.'
'What about lakes, where there any lakes nearby, or rivers?'
'I don't think' Amaia said slowly. 'There was just a sort of wooded area, a large forest near my home…' she furrowed her brow as she spoke, finally shaking her head. 'I can't remember anything else that would be of any use…gods…it was so long ago…I don't even remember what the inside of my home looked like…'
'It's ok. We've got something to go on at least' White Feather said, not at all discouraged. 'A small town within riding distance of the sea, within view of mountains and near a forest.' He placed his hands on his hips. 'Is that right?'
Amaia gave White Feather a strange look. 'Yes', she said uncertainly. 'It is.'
'Come on' White Feather said taking her by the hand. 'Let's go find a map.'

Amaia led White Feather through the rooms. There were many large halls within this place, but so many were filled with only paintings and nothing else, they felt empty, and cold. It took several minutes to walk from one end of the building to the other, and it was sooner than that, when White Feather began to complain.
'I'm not used to so much walking' he groaned.
'We've been walking for only a few minutes' Amaia chuckled. 'You can fly if you want.'
'I would' White Feather answered simply. 'But I would only make you jealous.'
Amaia stopped as they reached the far wall within one of the halls. She craned her head back, gazing up at the colossal painting that filled the entire wall before her.
'Here' she said. 'It's the map of this kingdom.'
White Feather gasped in awe at it, so beautifully it was painted, so detailed.
'I thought you would give me a map drawn on paper' he confessed. 'Or at least something a little smaller.
'If it's not suitable, there is another map in one of the other rooms, one of the whole known world.'
'No no' White Feather hastened. 'This is perfectly adequate. Now, let me see.' He frowned in thought. 'A small town you say…. not too far from the sea...within sight of the mountains….and near a forest…' White Feather pondered to himself, tapping his chin with a finger. 'A small town…' he said again, speaking slowly, 'like…' he said, raising a finger and pointing. 'This?'
White Feather moved across the hall and touched a point on the map, a small town in the bottom right-hand corner.
Amaia unfolded her arms, straightening up as she stared at the place White Feather indicated.
'That's it!' she said in surprise, speaking with certainty, brow creased. 'I really think….' She stared at it intently, 'I think that's it...'
'You see' White Feather gleamed at her. 'There is hope.' He turned to her, hugging her briefly before stepping back, still grasping Amaia by the shoulders firmly. 'I *will* get you out of this place' he told her, 'I *will* help you escape, and return you to your parents.'
'If my mother is still alive' Amaia said to him, 'could you…' she broke off.
'Don't worry' White Feather reassured her. 'I will make things right. Once I visit your father, he will realise you are still alive, and he will start looking for you.'
'Do you mean it?' Amaia asked hopefully. 'My father is a powerful and respected man; maybe he can…...maybe…'
'It's ok' White Feather said. 'I will travel to this town to find your parents; then I will come back for you.'
'Do you promise?' Amaia asked White Feather anxiously. 'Do you promise to come back for me? Not to forget me. Not to leave me.'
'Amaia' White Feather said kindly, cupping her face in his hands. 'There is no one in the world you can trust more than me.'

Amaia walked with White Feather, heading to one of the windows.
'Are you sure you'll be alright?' she asked him.

‘I was going to ask the same of you’ he winked. ‘Don’t worry’ he said with confidence, flashing her a grin. ‘I’ll be quite alright.’
The sun was setting at this time, and outside the confines of her home, the world was growing dark.
‘His house is large’ Amaia told him. ‘One of the biggest in the town…there should be a black stallion in the field nearby, if he still has it.’
‘I will find it’ White Feather reassured her. ‘Don’t you worry.’
‘Please be back soon’ Amaia begged of him, watching as he climbed upon the windowsill.
‘I must be back soon’ he bobbed his head at her. ‘I have news to bring.’ And with that, before she could say another word, he shot off, kicking himself off the wall and bringing forth his wings as he did so.
Amaia watched White Feather flutter away on his delicate looking glassy wings, swiftly diminishing to the size of a dot, before disappearing altogether.
Amaia sighed deeply, feeling nervous for news of her parents, and regret at seeing White Feather go. She had known him for only the briefest time, but already she felt a strong bond between them, and a desire for him to be by her side. She didn’t know why, and she couldn’t even begin to explain why she felt the way she did.
‘I've only just met him’ she murmured, ‘yet I trust him more than anything.’
Amaia gave a sigh of longing, turning her back to the tempting world beyond her window.
‘How wonderful it must be to have wings to fly’ Amaia said wearily to herself. ‘I wish I could be so lucky.’
That night she spent alone again. Having company with her and losing it so quickly made her feel sad and lonelier than ever.
Tonight, there was a great display outside her window, as the sky was lit up in fireworks. The bright lights shone in the world above the land; she could even hear now the servants celebrating in the kitchen, even through several rooms. Their loud voices were muffled through the walls. It sounded like they were all having a great time.
Amaia realised at that moment what the celebration was, it was one that happened, only once every eighty years. It was a religious holiday that celebrated the first rays of sunlight that shone in the sky after an eighty-year long winter. The holy stories tell of the god Ezla imprisoning the goddess Micro for eighty years beneath the rocky earth in a great cavern. He did this because he was madly in love with her, and wanted her for himself. Without the warm in the world that Micro created, everything grew cold. When at last she was freed eighty years later, a great party was held to celebrate her return. And this was the holiday the people rejoiced in. The celebration would begin in the night, and continued for the entire next day. It would stop only when night fell again.
This was a very precious celebration, and one that most would see only once in their lifetime.
And Amaia had missed it. She had hoped to spend it with her family. With her mother and father. The ones she loved.
But it was not to be.
Amaia felt more depressed now than she ever had before. She longed more than ever to have White Feather by her side. She had known him only briefly, and yet she missed him terribly.
‘White Feather’ she sobbed, brushing back tears. ‘Come back soon…’

Night fell, and it was many hours that White Feather travelled, flying without rest. He thought of the map as he travelled, always keeping it in mind as he moved over the landscape; flying in a straight line heading south. He found the small town, and the large manor on the hill. As he flew overhead, he saw there in the field below him, was a single black horse.

'This must be the right place' White Feather said to himself with a smile.

He landed upon the roof of the manor, treading lightly on foot. He slipped over the edge of the roof, fluttering before one of the windows; he landed carefully on the narrow ledge before it.

White Feather glanced into the room, seeing between the curtains a spacious bedroom where one man was alone. Lying with his back to the window on a large four-poster bed, the man was still, seemingly in a deep sleep.

White Feather stepped lightly off the ledge, descending in the air, fluttering his wings until he reached the ground. As his feet touched the stone paving before the door, his wings receded into his back and he straightened.

He intended to shrink in size to fit through the keyhole, but saw there was no need, after finding the front door was left unlocked.

White Feather crept through the door and entered the home. It seemed utterly deserted, and he found himself thinking how strange it was for only one man to live in such a large home. As he looked around him, moving through the rooms, he saw neglect everywhere. Dust layered the many ornaments, the coat of arms, the weapons on display; the pictures. The marble floor below him, once perhaps beautiful, was now filthy with dirt and muddy footprints, which had long since dried and hardened.

The rooms felt cold, not only because of the wind that howled through one of the shattered windows nearby, which had not been repaired, but from a lack of love. This home, was barren.

White Feather passed a large painting as he headed towards the stairs, a painting of a small family; farther and mother, and a young child that stood between them.

This must be Amaia White Feather thought as he glanced at the young girl. They all looked so happy in the painting. They were all smiling, and the tall figures standing behind the child, stood close to one another, each with an arm around the other.

White Feather ascended the stairs, heading to the bedroom he had seen through the window, and to the man sleeping in the bed.

He entered the room and approached the bed at the back wall.

White Feather felt sadness well inside him as he saw clearly. The man was truly alone. There was no woman by his side, no mother.

She must have died after all.

White Feather sighed deeply, pushing aside his sombre thoughts. He reached forwards, and touched the man at the temple, sending magic into his dreams. The man began to stir, as White Feather placed a spell upon him.

It was late the next day when White Feather returned to Amaia's side. She was fast sleep on her bed. The night was hot and she had left her window open, perhaps to allow a breeze to cool her down, or perhaps she left it open for him to enter by.
White Feather leant over her, shaking her gently awake. Amaia groaned, turning her head towards the disturbance. She opened her eyes, sitting bolt upright at the sight of him.
'Oh thank the gods you're back' she cried. 'Are my parents ok? Is my mother?'
'Your father is well' White Feather answered hastily. 'I placed a dream inside his head, a spell. When he wakes, he will be driven by a strong desire to find you. The spell I placed upon him will make you always in his thoughts.'
'And my mother?' Amaia demanded. 'Was she there?'
White Feather pursed his lips, frowning at her. He shook his head.
'No' he said. 'She was not.'
Amaia turned from him, laying on her front back on the bed and hugging the pillow.
She began to cry.

Chapter Fifty-Two
The Father

Over the next few days Amaia and White Feather spent their time together, whiling away the hours in talk. Amaia would tell White Feather of her early life, and he would listen with deep interest. Since the moment he had returned, White Feather had never left her side.
'Precious treasure' Amaia was saying. 'That was what they used to call me.'
She glanced to the side, seeing White Feather sitting on the edge of the sofa beside her, eagerly leaning forward as he listened, chin rested on his palm.
Amaia laughed quietly to herself.
'I remember one day' Amaia went on, 'I had to wear my best dress, because my father had hired a painter to paint our little family.' She smiled to herself. 'How I hated it. It was so boring for me to be standing in one spot for so long, and I complained bitterly. I remember how annoyed my father was becoming; eventually my mother let me go outside. The painting wasn't finished, I think the man had done most of it already, and painted the rest from memory. When I was eventually shown the finished piece…well' Amaia shrugged. 'I didn't care for such things back then, but if I were to see it now' she sighed. 'I don't know…'
'I believe I have seen that painting' White Feather began, 'when I visited your father's home.'
'I was a beautiful painting, was it not?'
White Feather smiled. 'It certainly was.' He lay down, resting on his back as he stretched out on the sofa, gazing at Amaia. 'Tell me about your cousin.'
'Gracie' Amaia said. 'My father's brother's daughter. What fun we had together. I remember the days we used to play in the park, and in the woods. One day my mother made a tree house for us to play in, and we sat in the branches behind the wooden walls she had built, with hats made out of leaves, and we pretended to be pirates. We…' Amaia went on. 'We….'

Her eyes began to well up in tears, and she buried her face in her hands.
'I just miss her so much' Amaia whispered through her falling tears. 'I had wished so desperately to see her again…. but……. *oh, White Feather*….'
Amaia felt a hand upon her shoulder, looking up to see her loyal guardian standing before her.
'Don't cry' he said, brushing her tears away. 'Please.'
'I can't believe she's dead' Amaia said in a hushed voice. 'I loved her so much, and she loved me so much in return. She always told me so. Every single day.'
'Remember the good times you had together' White Feather told her. 'Hang onto those memories, and don't forget, your father is still out there.'
'I hope to see him again someday' Amaia mumbled, composing herself.
'You will' White Feather said. 'I am certain of it.'
He leant forwards slowly, wrapping his arms around her and embracing her tightly.
'Never forget' White Feather whispered into her shoulder, 'I am here for you. I will always be here for you. Always.'
'I know' Amaia whispered back. 'I know you will.'
'I love you Amaia' White Feather told her. 'I will always protect you, no matter the cost.'
He leant back from her, holding her face in his hands and brushing the tears away from her cheeks with his thumbs.
'I love you' he said again, leaning forward and kissing her forehead.
He drifted back from her then, taking his seat once more on the sofa.
'Tell me more about your cousin' White Feather said, to take her mind off her sorrows.
'One day Gracie and I found a bird in the woods that had fallen out of its nest. We cared for it, loved it, and shared it between us. I named it Yayew, after a character in a story my mother told me one bedtime….' She broke off. 'I never did find out what happened to that bird.'
'Go on' White Feather said, eager for her to continue before she started to dwell on sad thoughts. 'Tell me more.'
'I loved that little green bird' Amaia smiled. 'I loved all animals. I remember saying to my mother that when I was older, I was going to save animals. That I was going to heal them and make them better. That was my dream. But there was one animal I did not like. Alastor.'
'Who's that?' White Feather sang curiously.
'My father's horse, a great black stallion. The same one in the field before my father's home. I used to be so terrified of Alastor. I loved animals, but I hated that horse. He was so big and scary; I was frightened that he might trample and kill me. He was the size of a mountain.'
'That sounds awful!' White Feather declared dramatically.
'I'm sure if I met him now that I wouldn't find him anywhere near as scary.' She broke off suddenly, noticing that one of the servants was standing by the door, holding a tray of food.
Amaia and White Feather had talked for so long, that Amaia had forgotten what time it was. She had even forgotten to feel hungry. She had not come to her meal, and so the meal had come to her.
The servant entered, silent as always. She placed the tray on the table before Amaia and swiftly left.
'How come the servants can't see you?' Amaia asked White Feather once they were alone again.

‘I can choose to be invisible if I wish’ White Feather smirked knowingly. ‘But my kind are unable to make themselves invisible to a Weather Maker.’
‘Oh.’
‘They can’t even hear me when I speak.’
‘Oh’ Amaia said again. ‘Good’ she finished.
‘I’ve just thought of something’ White Feather said brightly. ‘When we get out of here together, you not only have meeting your father again to look forward too, but meeting Gracie as well.’
‘I'm sure she has changed a lot’ Amaia said, pondering the thought. ‘I’m sure I won’t even be able to recognise her it’s been so long. She was just a child last I knew her…gods…she’d be a woman now…’
‘She probably wouldn’t recognise you either’ White Feather realised, speaking his thoughts aloud.
‘Oh no…. what if my father doesn’t recognise me?’ Amaia worried.
White Feather sighed smiling, leaning forward and stroking her black hair lovingly. ‘Eat your food’ he told her. ‘You must be hungry.’
‘What about you?’
‘I will have what's left’ White Feather told her, ‘and if there isn’t enough, then I can steal something from the kitchen.’ He winked at her. ‘It’s not like they would notice me.’

The servant Sarah, having placed the tray before Amaia and scurried around the corner, dashed back to the kitchen as fast as she could, back where the other servants worked.
‘I'm telling you she must be going crazy’ she spoke in a hurried whisper to them. ‘She’s talking to herself!’
‘Surely not’ another scoffed doubtfully.
‘If you don’t believe me, see for yourself.’
From then on, Amaia would be closely watched by all the servants.
The others quickly saw that Sarah was telling the truth.

The next day, Amaia spoke of her past again.
‘I was so spoilt. I got everything I wanted. All the toys, all the attention, everything, and I never appreciated it. I suppose I didn’t know any different. I loved both my parents, but I never realised how truly good they were to me until I grew up, until recently. I was an obnoxious little brat.’ She blinked slowly. ‘Those were the good days, when I was happy. But then one of my uncles died suddenly, and my father changed.’
A look of concern flickered across White Feather’s face.
‘Brice meant everything to my father, and when he died….’ Amaia shook her head. ‘Grief changes people. My father became neglectful. I never truly understood why…until I grew up. My other uncle, Arlen…he was always there to pick up the pieces. He was always there when my father wasn’t. In a way, he became like a sort of second father to me, and he cared for my mother too, as she cared for him. I saw.’ Amaia dropped her head. ‘Life from then on was miserable. But I don’t like to think of those days. I prefer to remember the days before that, when life was good.’

Amaia lifted her head, holding herself and leaning back against the wall.
'My parents were so in love. I remember seeing how happy they were together, sometimes they would play-fight as if they themselves were children, and no matter if they argued, they always made up in the end.' Amaia sighed. 'In the years that followed, after I came here…to this place, I would think of them…and remember. For all those years I have been trapped in these rooms…. how I have longed for such love and devotion as my parents had for each other. How I have longed to love, and to be loved, to have a family of my own.'
'You are still young' White Feather said to her. 'Such things are still possible.'
She turned and walked away, heading to her bedroom, White Feather followed. As they went, the *chink* of armour could be heard. Amaia paused, seeing a man dressed all in armour from head to foot, standing in one of the archways. He shifted at the sight of her, only his eyes were visible through the narrow horizontal slit in the helmet that he wore. His weapon, a long golden lance with an unforgiving razor end, he held close to his side. His gaze followed Amaia as she crossed into the next room, as always, White Feather was unseen to him.
'It's been a long while since I've seen one of the guards' Amaia said to White Feather in a whisper. 'I wonder why he's suddenly appeared.'
'Maybe he wants to check up on you' White Feather offered. 'To see if you're ok.'
'Maybe' Amaia replied unconvinced. 'Maybe he just wants to check up on me.'
She entered her bedroom, closing behind her the double doors.
'Do you think I've been imprisoned here because of my powers?' she asked.
'It is a possibility' White Feather replied simply.
'Magic' Amaia uttered. 'It's a strange thing…isn't it?'
'It is.'
'I have magic' Amaia said. 'I feel it living within me. But even so I feel I know so little about it.'
White Feather stood watching her, he shifted his weight from one foot to the other.
'Weather Makers do not have specific powers' White Feather explained. 'Different Weather Makers have different ranges of ability, and can use various abilities and combine them. Air pressures, temperatures, humidity and so many different things can be done……the magic can be used in different ways. For fun, for murder….' White Feather shrugged. 'Many things.'
He glanced down at a table nearby.
'This is a curious little thing' White Feather smiled, picking up one of the small paper treasures that Amaia had created during one of her many days of boredom.
A little model of a horse made of colourful paper, with a little mane and tail that trailed down its body. Upon the table, were many other little paper creations, sheep and goats and little animals, alongside figures of men and women.
'It's very pretty, isn't it?' White Feather said to Amaia. He gave her a devilish look. 'Make it dance.'
'What?'
'Make them all dance.'
'I don't understand.'
'Oh, I think you do.'
Amaia pursed her lips, brows knitted together.

‘Go on’ White Feather urged her. ‘It’s been far too long since you’ve truly been yourself.’
‘But I'm afraid’ Amaia breathed. ‘I'm afraid it will get me into trouble again.’
‘With who?’ White Feather asked her. ‘There is no one here. What is to fear from within these walls?’
Amaia hesitated, reluctant to give in.
‘Trust me’ White Feather spoke slowly. ‘What exactly are you afraid of?’
‘The unknown’ Amaia replied.
‘If that is the case, then you will live your entire life in fear’ White Feather told her. He lifted his hand, the paper horse resting on his open palm. ‘Do not fear what you do not know. If you allow yourself to give into fear, it will consume you, control you.’
Amaia took a step back, thinking of what he said, thinking that perhaps he was right.
‘Go on’ White Feather pressed. ‘Do it.’
She relented, for the first time in years, and only for the second time in her life, she gave into the powers that dwelt within her. She released her magic. Tickling her fingers through the air, she used her powers to dance the paper horse White Feather held.
Behind him also the other paper figures she had made began to lift in the air, spinning and moving back and forth their tiny little legs. White Feather laughed in joy at the sight as Amaia pushed her magic further. The wind in the room picked up, engulfing the both of them in a strong gale. The long curtains hanging either side of the window lifted and shook violently around, and the sheets from the bed flew about the room.
Amaia drew a deep breath, tensing further and squeezing her eyes tight shut, increasing her magic further. Snow began to flurry around the room, White Feather first realised what it was at its cold touch upon his cheek. He laughed again, throwing his hands up into the wind.
Amaia opened her eyes to the scene around her, increasing her magic yet again and bringing her powers to their climax, releasing all the powers that her been stored within her body all her life. She released them to their fullest. White Feather stumbled as the wind grew to an almost unbearable level and the snow swirled. He grabbed the side of the bed to stop himself being swept off his feet. It was a snow storm inside the room, but Amaia didn’t stop there. Suddenly the room turned damp, and the snow turned to sleet, then rain. The two of them were soaked within mere seconds. There was a sizzling sound, and then a large crack. The room lit up in a flash and White Feather fell to his knees. Amaia gasped, and she stopped her powers instantly. The room became eerily still.
‘Oh gods, are you alright?’ she cried.
White Feather ran his fingers through his hair, brushing back his fringe from his face. He looked up to her, and smiled.
‘I am splendid’ he grinned, and Amaia let out a sigh of relief.
‘I thought I had hurt you.’
‘It would take more than a little bit of lighting to hurt me, my kind are more resistant to the powers of Weather Makers than ordinary folk. We don’t easily get hurt by their magic; don’t you worry.’
‘I'm so glad, for a moment I thought….’
White Feather rose to his feet again, smirking at her, his soaked hair swept back.
‘Look at this place’ Amaia said glancing about her. ‘I've destroyed this room.’

All about the room was strewn clothes, sheets, books and all her little possessions. Torn and broken and completely soaked through. The entire floor was covered in shallow water.
Amaia hugged herself, drawing a shuddering breath; her long black hair clung to her wet skin and in her cold wet clothes, she began to shiver.
'Oh, poor dear' White Feather immediately began to fuss, noticing her discomfort. 'Come on; let's find some dry clothes for you.'
He walked with her, opening the double doors to her bedroom and stepping out into the hall outside. Suddenly they both saw a figure standing there. It was one of the servants, the one called Sarah.
She stared at Amaia, who stood there completely soaking wet. Sarah's eyes drifted past Amaia, completely unseeing White Feather, and into the messy room behind.
She stood there in shock, holding the tray of tea in her hands. Then after the longest time, without a word, she turned and marched away, taking the tray with her. No doubt running off to gossip of what she had seen to her many friends in the kitchen.
'You tricked me' Amaia told White Feather, hurt in her voice.
'No' White Feather sang. 'This would have happened anyway. I only made it happen sooner. I have set into motion the inevitable.'
Amaia watched the servant hurry away, a strange feeling stirring inside her.
She took a deep breath, wondering what would happen next.
'Don't worry' White Feather spoke with confidence. 'No matter what happens, I will protect you.'
Amaia shared a look with him, White Feather stared boldly back at her. He wasn't afraid, not in the slightest. And Amaia thought then.
What is it that you know?

'I knew there was something wrong with her' Sarah cried, bursting into the kitchen.
'You didn't give the tea to her' one of her friends noticed, seeing the tray still in Sarah's shaking hands. 'Sarah?' What's wrong? You look live you've seen a ghost.'
'It was worse than a ghost' Sarah gasped.
'What is it? What's wrong?' her friends replied, beginning to surround her.
Sarah placed the tray she carried carefully upon one of the counters, all eyes in the kitchen were now upon her, and everyone had paused, wondering what all the commotion was about.
'I saw the strangest thing' Sarah began. 'You wouldn't believe…'
More people within the large kitchen began to drift over to her, abandoning what they were doing to listen.'
'What is it?' her friend pressed. 'Hurry up and tell us, don't keep us waiting.'
'Alright' Sarah spoke slowly, gathering herself. 'This is what I saw…'

The guard stood there, utterly bored. His eyes had glazed over long ago, and he was stuck in a trance of complete disinterest, practically bored to tears. He was snapped back to attention

however when a figure entered the room, it was one of the servants. He frowned down at her as she approached him. She stood on her tip toes to whisper in his ear.
He nodded in understanding as she stepped back from him.
'I will let him know' the guard said.
The servant bowed and moved away.
The guard left his post, leaving the building and heading to the garden outside. He found another guard, and whispered in his ear, then that guard found another guard, this one closer to the gate that was the entrance of the place, and whispered the message again.
The guard on hearing the message wheeled on the spot and marched swiftly away, back through the gardens, he headed to the stables nearby. Relaying the message again to one of the lightly armoured guards who stood outside the stables, this guard on hearing the news quickly grabbed a horse and rode out of the gates that were opened for him.
The mounted guard rode swiftly on his chestnut mare which had been bred for its speed; he reached his destination within hours.
By then it was nightfall, and he left his horse in the courtyard without even bothering to unsaddle the beast.
He burst through the doors of the manor, marching past the soldiers and officials and heading to the office at the back of the entrance hall. He entered the room without knocking.
'What is the meaning of this intrusion?' the important figure sitting at the desk demanded with fury. 'You had better have a good reason for this interruption or else I will…'
The lightly armoured soldier interrupted again, speaking over him.
'Your highness,' the soldier bowed, ignoring the other faces of the less important people in the room that stared at him in surprise. 'It has happened…'

Tristan faltered at hearing the news, all his anger immediately dissipated.
'I see' he answered calmly, absorbing the information. 'Then I suppose…in that case…. it's time I paid her a visit. Thank you for your troubles' Tristan said, rising to his feet and straightening up. 'I will make sure you are properly rewarded. Now return to whatever business you have.'
'Thank you, your highness' the lightly armoured soldier bowed.
'And get my horse ready' Tristan called after the soldier as he made to leave the room.
'Of course your highness' the soldier replied doubling back, swiftly making his exit.
'Gentlemen' Tristan said to the Dukes around him, 'I have business of my own to attend to now, you must excuse me.'
A female figure stopped him as he crossed the entrance hall of his home, heading to the front door.
'Where are you going?'
Tristan paused, glancing at his wife.
'I must go out' he told her. 'Something important has come up.'
'Something important?'
'Yes' Tristan replied evasively.
His wife sniffed in distain; head held high as she turned to face the windows.
'You know I hate all these soldiers and fancy men coming into my home' she said arrogantly. 'I don't know why you let this place become so public.'

‘Business’ Tristan replied with anguished patience. ‘And anyway, it’s *our* home. In fact, if anything it’s more *my* home.’
‘It’s dark outside’ his wife said changing the subject. ‘Are you sure you want to go out now?’
‘Yes’ Tristan replied shortly.
‘In the dark?’ his wife persisted. ‘I'm sure it will rain soon. It would be such a terrible tragedy if your horse were to fall and break a leg. Such a thing would happen easily in the dark.’
Tristan glared at her. He knew full well that behind his back, his wife had men working for her. She could passively control him. Tristan had learnt this before. With minor threats, and unlikely accidents happening here and there whenever he went against her word.
‘Very well’ he relented, hating her even more. ‘I will leave tomorrow’ he spoke through gritted teeth.
‘When the sun is up’ his wife clarified. ‘And the morning is bright. I will see you off myself.’
‘Are you sure?’ he asked her. ‘Don’t you think it’s best to let sleeping beasts lie?’
‘Hmph’ she smirked at him humorously. ‘You're a funny one.’ She turned from him, gliding up the stairs and beckoning her handmaiden to her as she did so. The poor girl darted immediately to her side at the slightest flick of her mistress’s hand. Like a well-trained dog. The girl, so misfortunate to have fallen into such a position, was well aware of the punishment of failing to please her mistress, who never hit her. Instead, she would be punished in more creative, psychological ways. Tristan often thought of helping the girl, but hadn’t worked out a way to do it without making it look suspicious and making himself look guilty. He was sure, that if he did so, the girl would suffer for it.
‘My loving wife’ Tristan grumbled miserably to himself.
‘Your highness,’ called a voice from the door. One of his soldiers. ‘Your horse is ready.’
‘Return my horse to the stables’ Tristan called back to the man, seeing through the open door his white mare saddled and waiting for him.
‘Your highness?’
‘I will ride in the morning’ Tristan replied, walking away.
Dam you Tristan cursed his wife in his head. *I would have been better off had I married a tavern wench, instead of a scheming, manipulative demon.*

White Feather opened his eyes the moment the suns first light touched the sky, he waited for a few hours before deciding to wake Amaia. Drawing back the thick curtains and letting the now bright morning sun flood into the room. Amaia immediately frowned in displeasure, rolling over in bed to face the other way and hiding from the sun, holding several pillows over her head.
‘Now don’t be like that’ White Feather protested, gliding towards her. He climbed upon the bed as laboriously as possible and proceeded to sit on top of her.
‘Meeehh!’ Amaia cried.
‘What's that?’ White Feather sang happily. ‘I can’t hear you!’
‘I can’t breathe’ Amaia gasped.
‘Oh come now’ White Feather giggled, rolling off to lie beside her. ‘I'm not that heavy.’
‘Why do you wake me like this?’ Amaia grumbled, sitting up and rubbing her eyes.

‘Because the day is alive!’ White Feather called jovially. ‘It happened many hours ago, but I thought that I should let you rest, you looked very tired; you were even twitching in your sleep. I wondered what you were dreaming.’ He gleamed at her. ‘You looked ever so cute making faces in your sleep.’
Amaia scowled at White Feather. ‘What happened many hours ago?’ she asked suspiciously.
White Feather beamed happily. ‘The birds sang and the trees danced in the breeze. I saw the most beautiful formation of clouds…the way the morning light worked its magic on the world…it looked like a picture of heaven itself’ he sighed.
‘I'm sorry I missed it’ Amaia said flatly.
‘No you’re not’ White Feather cried indignantly at her. ‘You don’t even care!’
Amaia swung her legs over the edge of the bed, ignoring the mess of the sheets behind her. The servants would tidy it up, they always did.
Without a shred of modesty, Amaia lowered her nightshirt over her shoulders, letting the garment fall to the floor. She crossed the room completely naked to find which clothes she would wear today. She picked a beautiful dress of vibrant red and deep blue, it sat across her shoulders when she put it on, and fit her perfectly. Just like everything else she ever tried on.
‘I like that one’ White Feather said to her. ‘It’s a very pretty dress, in fact it’s the most beautiful dress I've seen you wear so far.’
‘You say that with every dress I put on’ Amaia commented back. ‘Even if it’s the same one.’
‘In that case’ White Feather gleamed. ‘It must not be the dress that’s getting more and more beautiful, it must be you.’
Amaia giggled at him. ‘You're very sweet.’
He smiled silently back.
Amaia left her bedroom, which had since been tidied. There was no longer water inches deep, covering the floor, and all the curtains and bed sheets and clothes had since been replaced with new ones. But since that day, Amaia had not been able to escape the stares of the servants. Since that day, they acted differently around her, treated her differently, like she was a freak. Amaia noticed them looking at her, always when they thought she wouldn’t notice. White Feather said he had not noticed this when she brought it up with him, but she suspected that he was not being fully truthful.
Amaia wandered through the many halls, coming to sit at the breakfast table. She waited for her food to appear, as it did so every day, whatever time she decided to wake. As it did since she could remember, since the day she first arrived here.
Her breakfast came and she ate quickly, White Feather picking the bits of food he fancied off her plate as she did so. As soon as she pushed her plate away from her, indicating she had finished, a servant appeared. Amaia found this odd, usually they waited until she was gone, but today…
And then the strangest thing happened. She was just rising to her feet to leave the room, when the servant actually spoke to her.
Amaia faltered for a moment, still comprehending what had happened.
‘What?’ she blurted out.
The servant repeated herself.
‘There is someone here to see you.’
‘Me?’ Amaia repeated in shock. ‘Ok…’

The servant bowed her head submissively. ‘He is coming now.’
The double doors leading to a room Amaia had not been allowed to go to before, suddenly opened, and in walked a man. He was striding towards her confidently, his dress suggested he was wealthy, perhaps vastly so.
The man stopped before Amaia, his piercing stare boring into her. Amaia shrank under his gaze.
‘Leave us’ the man commanded, and the servant swiftly left. Amaia was now alone with this man. Beside her, White Feather stuck close by, grasping her shoulder briefly to remind her that he was there.
The man considered Amaia for a moment, looking her up and down. And then he let out a deep sigh.
‘I had no idea that you were going to be so beautiful’ he said.
‘I know you’ Amaia gasped suddenly. ‘You're…’

The leader approached, staring intently down at her.
‘Gods you look just like your mother’ he breathed. ‘Amaia…’

‘You're that man’ Amaia realised. ‘I saw you when…that time….’
The man smiled briefly, before becoming sombre.
‘That was a tragic day’ he said. ‘But I'm glad you remember me.’
‘No’ Amaia shook her head. ‘I don’t know who you are. I've never seen you before that day.’
She faltered then, studying his face closely.
‘You look like me’ she said.
The man nodded.
‘Now where is your companion?’ he asked. ‘The one you’ve been speaking to, the fairy.’
White Feather’s eyes widened at this, he glanced to Amaia who was staring at him now.
‘How do you know of him?’ Amaia asked.
The man blinked slowly. ‘My mother was a Weather Maker’ he explained. ‘I spoke to her fairy often. He was a very polite and well mannered, but he disappeared, after…’ he broke off. ‘Will you reveal yourself fairy’ he said. ‘So that I might see you and speak to you.’
White Feather looked to Amaia, who gave a nod. He then let his spell drop.
The man let a slow smile cross his face.
‘You're a different kind of fairy to the one my mother had, he was older and…different.’ He paused. ‘What is your name?’
‘White Feather.’
The man smiled again.
‘My mother’s fairy was called Pie Frost.’
‘That’s a stupid name’ White Feather retorted.
‘I always thought so too’ the man said. ‘I was often told off by my mother for saying, in my younger days when I was a boy.’
‘How is it that you know so much?’ Amaia asked him. ‘Who are you?’
‘My name is Tristan’ he replied. ‘I am your father.’

Chapter Fifty-Three
The Tower

Amaia felt a jolt in her heart. She and White Feather shared a look of shock, both in utter disbelief.
'What?' Amaia gasped.
'I am your father' Tristan repeated.
'But…why…how? I don't understand.'
Tristan indicated the table beside them.
'I think we should sit and talk' he said.
At that exact moment, the double doors opened again, and a woman came striding in. The beautiful woman was wearing a low-cut dress with confidence, and colours that were vibrant and bold, speaking volumes. Her blond hair was tied up, showing off her swan-like neck, around which she wore the most beautiful jewellery.
Tristan's expression immediately darkened at the sight of her, and Amaia noticed his demeanour change, his brows knitted together as he glowered.
'My my' the woman said as she sailed into the room, a small black-haired woman scurrying by her side. By the look of her simple dress, she was a servant. 'What a splendid gathering' the woman said, unable to see White Feather who had made himself invisible again, just in time as the doors had opened. 'I must say I was quite saddened to find that I was not invited.'
'Amaia' Tristan said through gritted teeth. 'This is Olithia. My wife.'

They sat at the table together, Amaia glancing from one to the other. The man, who claimed to be her father; and the woman that Amaia presumed, would claim to be her mother.
'So, I suppose I have a lot I should explain to you' Tristan began.
Across the table from him Olithia knitted her fingers together, resting her chin on her hands as she leant forwards with elbows on the table.
'Are you really my father?' Amaia asked.
'Yes' Tristan spoke slowly, nodding once.
Across the table from him, Olithia smiled.
'But my father is called Farrell, and my mother…' Amaia's eyes lowered. 'She was called Ramana.'
'No' Tristan said, 'Farrell is not your father. I am.'
Across the table, Olithia's smile widened.
'But how can that be true?' Amaia asked him.
White Feather who was sitting on top of the table with his legs crossed and leaning back on his palm, watched Tristan closely, with mistrust clear in his expression.
'I suppose I should start from the beginning, from your birth….no, it was before that.' Tristan leant back in his seat, staring at the ceiling in thought. 'My mother, she became very ill. She slipped into a coma about……..' he bit his lip in thought. 'Thirty years ago? Thirty-two years ago, I think?' he faced Amaia again. 'No one knows what's wrong with her; it's as if

she's under a spell of some kind. She looks as if she were only sleeping, never aging, never waking, since the first day she began her long rest. I don't know if she will *ever* wake, but I miss her terribly.' Tristan sighed forlorn. 'I know you too have lost your mother' he said to Amaia, 'it is a horrible thing to endure.' He paused. 'There has not been a single healer in the lands that has been able to help my mother. My father, the king, he has a lot of influence, but even he, even after all these long years, has not been able to find anyone who can help her, or who even knows what's wrong.' Tristan clenched his jaw. 'My father loves my mother dearly, and even to this day he has not stopped trying to save her.'

'That is a very sad story' Amaia said. 'But I don't understand what that has to do with me.'

'I will explain. My father, some time ago, after he had exhausted every other means to help his wife by any healer that exists, moved onto Weather Makers. His wife, my mother, is a Weather Maker. My father believes that another Weather Maker would be able to help her.'

'Why?' Amaia asked.

'There is no reason he should think this' Tristan said. 'He has been driven mad over the years by grief over his loss. He is not prepared to accept the possibility that his wife may never wake, so has been driven to do *anything*, that might work. So far nothing has, no matter how many Weather Makers have been brought before him. It seems that there is no one on this earth that can help her, but he is not willing to accept this, no matter how many times I have tried to explain or reason with him. He refuses to see what he is doing; he refuses to even listen. It has been so frustrating for me, like trying to stop the wind blowing using only words. After several years I gave up trying.' Upon the table White Feather listened closely to this, remaining in utter silence and invisible to all but Amaia. 'I miss her so much' Tristan went on. 'When it first happened, I felt a physical ache in my heart, which now…years later has become only a dull throb. Though I feel I will never fully recover from losing her. We were very close.' Tristan went silent for a moment as he thought of his mother the queen. 'I saw so many Weather Makers come and go over the years. The ones brought before my father, taken from their homes and families. I never found out what happened to them after my father had seen them, I felt so terrible for them being taken away like that. But there was little I could do to save them.' Tristan glanced towards Amaia again. 'I am the thirteenth son of my father. There is very little chance of me ever reaching the throne, but I don't care for such a thing anyway, I only care for my children. When you, our second child was born' he said, glancing for the briefest of moments towards Olithia, who remained silently smiling, 'it was one of the happiest days for me. '

'I have a sibling?' Amaia asked.

'You do' Tristan acknowledged quickly before getting back to topic. 'But my deepest fears were realised, when I saw the birthmark on your body.'

'What birthmark?'

'It fades after only a few hours, but my mother had it when she was born, as did every Weather Maker I have ever spoken to. But' Tristan continued, 'I had prepared for this. My mother was a Weather Maker, so I realised there was a chance of one of my children being so too. I didn't want any harm to come to my children, I have watched so many other Weather Makers go missing after the king has learnt of their existence and taken them from their families. I didn't want the same to happen to you, and so I hid you. Over the months before your birth, I sent out numerous soldiers, only my most trusted men, to watch over several

women who were at the same stage of pregnancy as Olithia. And when Ramana began to go into labour, the soldier that was watching her, sent a message by falcon, it was the fastest way. I was in the town within an hour of the baby being born. It was stillborn. Ramana was devastated to say the least. When a mysterious stranger appeared offering her a healthy new born baby instead, she was more than willing to accept.'

'But why didn't she ever tell me?' Amaia asked.

'Maybe she intended to one day' Tristan replied. 'But you were still very young when she was killed; perhaps she intended to wait until you were mature, when you would fully understand.'

Amaia lowered her head, tears welling up. Before her sitting on the table, White Feather remained impassive.

'I miss her so desperately' Amaia whispered. 'I wish there was a way I could see her again.'

Tristan opened his mouth, but before he could speak Olithia interrupted.

'That is a nice little story my dear husband.' He gritted his teeth as she spoke, a vein in his temple pulsing. 'It was so convenient for you to appear at *just* the right moment to give this woman her new baby.'

'What do you mean?' Amaia asked her tentatively.

'What I'm saying is that I never birthed you. You are not my daughter. *My* daughter was the one that was stillborn.'

Amaia glanced toward Tristan uncertainly.

'Olithia has never gotten over the loss of her daughter' Tristan explained, waving a hand dismissively at his wife, and speaking as if she wasn't there. 'Just like my father chooses to believe my mother can be saved, Olithia chose to believe her daughter was stillborn rather than live with the knowledge that someone else was raising her child. She is' Tristan went on, 'selfish, and possessive.'

Rather than being insulted by these quips, Olithia seemed to relish in them as she smiled even wider.

'It was too risky for us to see you' Tristan said, 'it would only have caused complications and unwanted questions. So, we left you there, growing up to believe Farrell and Ramana were your parents. It was the best thing I could do to protect you. But that day you used magic, I realised you were in danger.'

'How do you know about that?' Amaia asked.

'Every single day, there would be someone watching over you on my command, for your safety of course. To protect you. I only regret that I was unable to reach you in time, because on that day there was another who saw you use magic…one of my father's men. I rode to the town as soon as I heard. I was able to save you from my father's men, but I was too late to save Ramana. I'm sorry.'

'It makes sense now' Amaia said. White Feather quickly glanced to her at this. 'Those men who first took me were the king's men. And the men who set the ambush to stop them, those were yours?'

'Yes' Tristan nodded. 'That's right.'

'It's funny how it took you so long to reach the town when Ramana was killed' Olithia said loudly, 'but when Ramana was in labour, you arrived *just* in the nick of time.'

‘I was away the day Amaia was seen using magic’ Tristan replied, barely able to suppress his snarl. ‘*You know* that. I arrived as fast as I could when I heard she was in danger.’
‘Oh’ Olithia replied curtly. ‘That’s…. convenient.’
Tristan jerked his head away from her, teeth grinding and brow knitted together in irritation. She knew just how to get to him.
‘I'm afraid the truth is a lot simpler’ Olithia said speaking to Amaia now. ‘I had a stillborn girl. Tristan was so devastated that he began to obsess. He found a woman who had recently given birth to a baby girl, like the one he should have had, and in his mind, he adopted her. On the day he saw you use magic, he realised what you were, a Weather Maker like his dear mother. A Weather Maker, just like the many other Weather Makers that were being captured by the king and ended up going missing forever. He began to panic. Why do you think it took so long for help to reach you? He had to ride all the way home, gather his men and ride all the way back. By that time his father the king who is far more resourceful, had already reached the town you grew up in. He was able to save you, but not your mother Ramana. When he saw that she was dead, he adopted you and brought you into this home’ she said indicating the building around them. ‘But he didn’t want to risk visiting you, because for years later since that day, his father the king has been suspicious of him, accusing him of attacking his men that day. But he was unable to prove it. Tristan has often voiced his disagreement in the past over what the king is doing, kidnapping Weather Makers across the land, and so was the first to fall under suspicion. And so, he hid you’ Olithia concluded. ‘Not because you were his daughter, but simply to save a life. Just like the king chooses to believe his wife can be saved even after all these years, my husband chooses to believe that Ramana was the one who had a stillborn child, rather than live with the knowledge that our precious daughter had died before she had a chance to live. It was easier for him to live a fantasy than to face the truth. He is’ Olithia glanced at Tristan, ‘delusional, and naïve, thinking he can brush over the past and make the truth what he wants it to be.’ She smirked. ‘Like his father.’
‘Dam you woman’ Tristan snarled.
Olithia smirked again, rising from the table she turned to leave. ‘Oh’ she said pausing and speaking back to Amaia, ‘and he’s lying about the birthmark as well.’
She swiftly left the room then, followed by her submissive handmaid.

A short time later, Amaia was walking along the corridors through a part of the building she had not been to before. The doors had been opened for her, and she ventured forth. She came to a stop before a large painting set high up on the wall. She considered it for a moment, tilting her head at it.
‘I never liked that picture’ Tristan spoke, coming to stand behind her.
It was a painting of Tristan and Olithia standing together with their arms around each other, both smiling widely.
‘This was painted without either of us being present’ Tristan told her. ‘You have to understand’ he said turning to her, ‘I married her for political reasons, nothing more. She has been a curse upon me from the very first day I met her.’ He paused, glancing towards the painting again. ‘It hung in our home for only a few days; then I gave it to one of my soldiers to dispose of. I didn’t know he brought it here.’

Amaia couldn't help thinking, as she stared up at the painting before her, how much it reminded her of the one that was painted of Farrell and Ramana and herself, all those years ago. She didn't know if it made her feel better or worse seeing this painting, it just made her feel……strange, like none of this was really happening. She wondered, could it really be true what Tristan had said, and that Farrell and Ramana really were not her true parents?
She stared at the painting. There were no children in this one, only Tristan and Olithia, holding each other smiling.
Amaia let out a slight gasp of surprise as Tristan took her by the hand, walking with her away from the painting. He sighed deeply then, as if feeling a longing in his soul.
'I've missed you so much' he said. 'I was never there for you, and no matter how hard I wish I could change things….' He grasped her hand tighter, pausing and turning to her. 'I'm sorry…'
Behind them White Feather watched silently.
'I wish I had been there to watch you grow' Tristan said. 'My daughter…' he stroked her cheek tenderly.
'Is what you say all true?' Amaia said. 'Are you really my father, despite what Olithia says?'
'She is nothing but a cruel and vicious liar' Tristan spoke with a snarl. 'She seems to take pleasure in seeing others suffer.'
'That's right' White Feather voiced loudly from behind them. 'How can *she* possibly be Amaia's mother?'
'Children are not always like their parents' Tristan said defensively to him. 'Just take a look at my father. If he finds out I've been hiding a Weather Maker from him…...I wouldn't even feel confident to say that he wouldn't kill me for it. Listen to me Amaia' he said speaking to her again. 'I want us to go away together…and catch up on the time we've lost.'
'But what about my father? I mean…' Amaia faltered.
'Farrell is not your father' Tristan said shaking his head.
Behind them, White Feather pursed his lips.
'Just think about it' Tristan said letting go of her hand, 'Please.'
'Alright…'
He backed off, walking away and leaving Amaia alone. He knew she needed time to think.
'He's lying' White Feather said angrily the moment he was out of earshot.
'How do you know?' Amaia asked.
'I've just got this gut feeling.' White Feather balled his fists. 'Call it instinct…call it what you want.'
'Then why does he look like me?' Amaia cried desperately. She hugged herself then. 'Gods I'm so confused, have I been living a lie all this time?'
White Feather shrugged helplessly. 'Some people just look like each other' he offered. 'There are enough people in this world for that to happen. And besides' he added, 'he has blonde hair, so does Olithia. Yours is black. Like your mother's. Like *Ramana's*.'
'But how did he know my name?'
'There could be a thousand ways for him to find that out.'
'But…' Amaia began to plead miserably. 'I look like Olithia too.'

‘No’ White Feather shot at her, his tone aggressive. ‘You're just doubting yourself. Their lies are causing you to see things that are not there. You're being misled. You look like Ramana, your mother.’
‘How do you know her name?’ Amaia asked him meekly. ‘And how do you know what she looked like?’
‘There was a painting in your home’ White Feather explained. ‘The home you grew up in. Your *true* home. The painting was of you, and your parents. Small writing at the bottom read each of your names. Farrell and Ramana with their daughter Amaia.’
‘I don’t know what to think anymore’ Amaia sobbed, turning away from him.
She gasped then, finding herself standing face to face with Olithia. Her sudden appearance had caught her off guard.
A slow smile spread across Olithia’s face. A predatory smile.
‘Hello’ she said. ‘My *daughter*.’
Her sarcasm was not lost on Amaia.
‘Come sit with me’ Olithia said, herding Amaia over to a collection of low seats over by one of the windows.
Amaia sat nervously beside Olithia, feeling extremely uncomfortable. White Feather loomed around them, standing over the both of them like a silent ghost, invisible to Olithia.
‘You know’ Olithia began. ‘It’s such a terrible thing that’s happening to these Weather Makers, them being hunted by the king and all. It would be such a terrible shame if the king found you. Maybe you *should* go off with Tristan, *run away* together.’ Her eyes crinkled at the edges. ‘How exciting.’
Amaia’s expression was blank as she listened. She was unable to speak.
‘I wouldn’t want to waste time though’ Olithia went on. ‘The Weather Makers that are caught by the king…suffer terrible ends…’ her voice trailed off. ‘He murders them you know’ she said causally. ‘When they don’t give him what he wants. When they fail to bring his wife back from her coma, the disappointment he suffers…the despair…’ she smiled. ‘They suffer…terribly.’
Amaia’s breath began to quicken, and her chest rose and fell sharply.
‘The last Weather Maker died in the most horrible way. He ripped her spine from her body, and turned her *inside out*.’ Olithia leant forwards towards Amaia. ‘She was tortured for hours...that poor girl. Just think……that could happen to you.’

Amaia burst through the double doors, stumbling into the next room.
‘I have to get out of here’ she cried. ‘There’s no way that cruel beast could be my mother. I have to escape. I have to go home to my father…to Farrell.’
She rounded on White Feather, grabbing him by the shoulders and pulling him close.
‘You have to help me’ she pleaded shaking him. ‘You have to help me get out of here.’
White Feather did not pull away from her; instead, he gave a firm nod. ‘I think there is something I can do to help. Just close your eyes.’
‘What?’

‘Trust me.’
Amaia took a deep breath. She let go of White Feather and closed her eyes.
She waited, then opened them again, and White Feather was gone.
‘White Feather?’ She asked tentatively. ‘Where are you?’
‘Right here’ came a voice.
She felt something touching her shoulder, glancing down she saw that it was White Feather. Now a size small enough to stand in the palm of her hand, he pushed her hair back, smiling up at her.
‘What do you think?’ he asked.
‘You're so tiny.’
He fluttered through the air with his delicate wings. Amaia opened her hands, allowing White Feather to land there.
‘I can use my small size to open one of the doors from the other side’ White Feather said. ‘We could escape together.’
‘We have to’ Amaia urged him. ‘I cannot stay here another moment.’
‘I couldn’t agree more. That door’ he said pointing to the one behind her. ‘I could unlock it from the other side.’
‘Do your magic’ she whispered to him.
White Feather took flight, darting through the air and growing even smaller as he did so, he slipped through the keyhole, disappearing from sight.
A few seconds later, there was a quiet click coming from door that had previously been locked. Amaia rushed forwards, pulling back momentarily. She reached out towards the handle, hesitated, then grabbed it, turning.
White Feather was waiting for her on the other side, having returned to his previous size, as tall as she was now.
‘Be careful’ he whispered to her. ‘There are many guards about.’
White Feather led the way, as they moved through the unfamiliar rooms one after the other. Amaia’s body shaking slightly as she followed in White Feather’s footsteps, her breath in shallow gasps and body tense.
‘There is a door’ White Feather whispered back at her as they crept along, ‘just around the corner’ he pointed. ‘It leads to the garden, from there we could…’
‘Hey!’ came a voice.
Amaia spun around, seeing a heavily armoured guard standing behind her in full sight.
‘Stay right where you are’ he ordered.
Amaia instantly bolted, tearing down the corridor around the corner and towards the door White Feather said would lead to the garden, but when she reached it, she found it locked.
‘No!’ she screamed banging on the wood in desperation. ‘Gods no!’
White Feather whirled around, seeing the guard coming up behind them. He threw his hand out, sending towards him a blinding white light. When it faded, the guard lay collapsed before him, and Amaia was gone.
‘Amaia?!’ he called after her, seconds later hearing the sound of another door slamming shut nearby. In her panic, she had run away.
He made after the noise, finding behind the door a spiral staircase that wound its way up a tower. He tore up the stairs Amaia had fled, chasing after her.

Amaia stood on the edge of the balcony. The wind this high up was cold and sharp, though not unpleasant on her skin. She had become flushed, exhausted from her trek running up the spiral stairs of the tower behind her. She had thought that she might escape this way, but her path had led only to this dead end.
But she did not despair. She could still escape.
'Mother…' she breathed. 'I will see you again.'
She took a step forward, standing at the very the edge of the wall-less balcony. She tilted, just as she did so, White Feather appeared behind her. He cried out, running forwards to try to stop her. But he was far too late.
She plummeted, head first towards the ground. The last thing she saw was the wall of the tower she had climbed shooting past.
She hit the ground, and was killed instantly.

Her body was found shortly after, fallen in a bush. The leaves had concealed her as the twisting green vines wrapped themselves around her body, entangling her.
The soldiers had been the ones to find her. One of them fought through the thick thorns, lifting her lifeless form in his arms and resting her upon the stone ground nearby.
Tristan ran through the garden, slowing to a stop and staring down at Amaia's dead body.
'I'm sorry your majesty' the soldier that had carried her said. 'She jumped. We could not reach her in time.'
Tristan raised his head to the tower, seeing above him a row of soldiers standing at the edge, looking down to the scene below. He searched, but Tristan could see no sign of White Feather. Perhaps he had chosen to remain invisible, or perhaps he had fled altogether.
He glanced behind him towards one of the windows, and saw his wife standing there looking back down at him. Her expression was vacant, and he could not read her emotions from what he saw. Perhaps she felt nothing.
'My lord!' the soldier who had carried Amaia gasped.
Tristan looked back at him.
'Her body' the soldier said. 'It's gone!'
Tristan lifted his eyes to the darkening sky, watching as the thick black clouds rolled above the lands.
'No' he spoke slowly. 'She is still out there somewhere, and I will find her.'

Chapter Fifty-Four
The Vision

‘Ahhh…’
She sat up gingerly, immediately placing a hand upon her head. Her body was stiff from lying awkwardly on the ground for perhaps a long time, and as she looked about her, she saw that she lay in a forest.
The light from the sun shone between the columns of the trees, and the forest floor was layered with a carpet of long brown needles.
‘I'm in a pine forest’ she said. She stiffened when she suddenly noticed a male figure sitting cross legged next to her.
‘Who are you?’
The male figure smiled at her. But it was a sad smile.
‘My name is White Feather’ he said to her.
‘What's my name?’
‘Amaia’ he replied.
She furrowed her brow, lowering her head and groaning.
‘I can’t remember anything’ she said. ‘Why can’t I remember anything?’ she looked up again. ‘Where is this place?’
White Feather glanced about him then, taking in his surroundings.
‘I'm not sure really’ he said. ‘It’s just a wood somewhere.’
‘Why is my hair green?’ Amaia said, noticing as her long thick hair fell around her shoulders.
‘Magic’ White Feather replied simply. ‘From when you fell in the thorn bush.’
‘How did I get here?’ Amaia asked him. ‘And why don’t I remember anything?’
White Feather gave a heavy sigh.
‘There is a lot to explain’ he said. ‘I will tell you everything later, but now, I think you should eat.’
He picked up a bundle that had been sitting beside him, a modest amount wrapped in cloth. Inside was food, cheese, salted port, dried fruit and a skein of water.
‘Here’ he said handing it to her. ‘Take it.’
‘What about you?’
‘I've already eaten.’
She took the bundle from him. ‘Were did you get this?’
‘I stole it’ White Feather said. ‘There is a small town nearby called Blackrain. I stole the food from an inn.’
‘I hope the innkeeper doesn’t mind too much’ Amaia said picking up a piece of dried fruit and beginning to eat.
‘It’s ok’ White Feather replied. ‘He won’t even notice.’
‘Maybe we should go to this town’ Amaia suggested. ‘Maybe someone there knows who I am.’
‘I don’t think that would be very likely’ White Feather said.
‘Why not?’
‘Because…’ he went silent in thought. ‘You were born in another town a long way from here; a town called Kett’s where you spent your childhood. But you were taken to another place, where you spent the majority of your life behind walls. It would be very unlikely that anyone in Blackrain knows you.’
‘Then how do *you* know me?’

‘Because I knew you before you lost your memory.’
‘Why have I lost my memory?’
White Feather sighed again. ‘I will explain later’ he said wearily. ‘I am very tired.’
‘Why don’t we go to this town then? We could rest at the inn.’
‘Because’ White Feather said. ‘The town in a long way away, and it’s in the opposite direction to Kett’s, which is where we’re going.’
‘You were able to get there’ she argued.
‘Yes’, White Feather said. ‘But I can travel a lot faster than you.’
She hugged her knees to her chest then.
‘It will be getting dark soon’ White Feather told her. ‘In the morning, we will start our journey back to your home. The home where you were born, and you will see your father again.’
‘What about my mother?’
‘She died…’ White Feather said gently. ‘A long time ago.’
Amaia’s eyes widened.
‘When you’ve finished eating’ White Feather went on. ‘I will explain everything to you. Then you must rest. We’ve got a lot of walking to do in the morning.’
That night, Amaia lay on her side, resting with the fairy lying behind her, his body close to hers. He rested his wings across her body, using his magic to keep her warm.
Throughout the night, Amaia slept peacefully.

The next morning, White Feather was exhausted before the day began. He had spent so much energy keeping Amaia warm during the night, but he did not complain, and refused to tell her what was wrong when she asked. Instead, he insisted over and over again that he was fine.
‘So we are trying to escape from the prince called Tristan. The one who claims to be my father.’
‘Yes’, White Feather replied to Amaia. ‘But he is nothing but a liar.’
‘How do you know?’
‘I told you last night’ White Feather said. ‘I just have a gut feeling. Farrell is your father. I am sure of it.’
‘But what if he’s not?’
‘Farrell is your father’ White Feather insisted. ‘He raised you and loved you, and now, he is searching for you.’
‘Why did it take him so long to start looking for me?’
‘His brother was killed a long time ago’ White Feather said. ‘He was so wrapped up in his grief, that for a moment he lost himself, and when you were taken, he assumed you were dead.’
‘How do you know all of this?’
‘You told me’ White Feather answered simply.
‘Oh, that’s right’ Amaia said flatly. ‘I lost my memory……when I died…’
‘Come on’ White Feather ushered her towards him. ‘We should get going. I'm going to return you to your father Farrell.’

They walked side by side through the woods. The morning was still young, and the air around them was cool, the chill of the night clung around them before diminishing little by little with every passing minute.
A short time later White Feather spoke.
'I'm not a warrior' White Feather said to her, 'but I will protect you as best I can. I will do everything in my power to keep you safe.'
'I know you will' Amaia replied. 'I don't know why, but I feel that I can trust you.'
'Your kind and my kind share a bond that dates to times long past' White Feather told her. 'I would give my life for you if need be.'
'Thank you' Amaia breathed. 'Thank you for everything. I'm still so confused, but I feel more at ease with you by my side.'
White Feather placed his arm around her shoulders silently, and together they walked.

For hours they travelled, walking slowly onwards, never leaving the woods. Even though their pace was gentle, White Feather was becoming exhausted. The journey was clearly taking its toll on him.
'Maybe we should rest' Amaia suggested, unable to keep quiet any longer, seeing clearly, that he was in great discomfort.
White Feather fell to his knees, arms hanging limply at his sides and head hung.
'My feet are agony…' he cried. 'Oh…I'm not used to so much walking.'
'Perhaps we should rest' Amaia suggested again, this time more urgently. 'Please. It pains me to see you like this.'
'Alright' White Feather gasped, 'maybe we can rest, just for a little while.'
'Why don't you fly alongside me?' Amaia asked him.
'No' White Feather shook his head stubbornly. 'I must share your burden, if you are to walk this distance, then so will I.'
'Can I' Amaia asked tentatively, '*see* your wings? Please?'
White Feather's expression lit up at that.
'Of course,' he gleamed. 'I'll show you mine, if you show me yours.'
'Mine?' Amaia asked uncertainly.
'Your powers' White Feather prompted.
'Let me see your wings first.'
'Alright' White Feather smirked, obeying her wish.
Amaia gasped slightly at the sight as he revealed his wings. She lifted a hand towards them, running her fingers along one of White Feather's four glass-like wings.
'They are beautiful' Amaia breathed. 'They are like dragonfly wings.'
She leant back, sitting upon the trunk of a fallen tree. Above her the canopy of leaves was thick, and nearby through the trees could be seen the orange sky, growing redder.
'Could you tell me more' she asked White Feather, 'about my death. You said I fell. Why did I wake here in these woods?'
'Weather Makers have a certain number of lives' White Feather explained. 'It varies from one individual to the next, often just a random number. The last Weather Maker I served had four lives.'

‘How many do I have?’ Amaia asked him.
White Feather shrugged. ‘Only you know that.’
Amaia lowered her eyes. ‘Can you tell me about my parents?’ she asked. ‘The ones I grew up with?’
White Feather smiled kindly at her, and began to recite the story she herself had told to him, only a few days ago, but what felt now like a lifetime. To both of them.
‘Your mother was a happy soul. She took pleasure in the simplest things in life, the early morning birds which would sit on their high perches singing to one another like a chorus, the way the leaves would rustle and dance in the winds. The way the sun would shine off the surface of the ponds in the forest she used to walk in, the forest she met your uncle, Arlen. Shortly after which, she married your father Farrell. Then you came along.’
White Feather spoke for hours about Amaia’s early life, telling her of everything that had happened to her before that terrible day when her life changed forever. The day that her mother was killed, and the prince Tristan had taken her into isolation until she matured.
‘How come I don’t remember any of this?’ Amaia asked him after a time. ‘How come I've forgotten my entire life before I woke up in these woods? It feels like the first time I've ever seen the light of day. And remind me again why my hair turned green.’
‘When a Weather Maker dies’ White Feather explained, ‘it’s as if they are born again. Their spirit rises and goes away from the place where they died, and to another place, somewhere quiet and isolated, ready to rise again. When they wake, they remember nothing of their past, and that is what we fairies are for. To help the Weather Makers remember.’
‘And my hair?’
‘The spirit of the Weather Maker that dies, before it rises again, sometimes takes a little piece of the environment with it. You fell into an ivy bush, and became tangled in the thorns. When you woke in your new body, your hair was green, like the leaves of the bush that caught you.’
‘Oh…’
‘So’ White Feather said clapping his hands upon his knees, ‘yesterday I told you everything about the prince Tristan and his ghastly wife, and today I've told you everything I know about your past with your parents, Ramana and Farrell. I have told you everything I can think of now.’
‘There is something I don’t understand though’ Amaia said. ‘Why do Weather Makers exist? And why do they hold such powers?’
‘They were originally created to protect the realm.’
‘From what?’
‘It’s been forgotten.’
‘Then who created them?’
‘It was so long ago, even my kind cannot remember.’
Amaia frowned at him unconvinced.
‘Weather Makers have many different powers’ White Feather went on. ‘Some are stronger than others. Each Weather Maker has an affinity for a particular element, one they feel most comfortable with.’ He shot her a sideways glance, smirking at her. ‘Yours is frost’ he said.
‘And you think I'm supposed to protect the realm?’ Amaia asked sceptically, raising an eyebrow.

‘Well,’ White Feather shrugged nonchalantly. ‘Not so much anymore. Those days have passed.’
‘You're making that up.’
‘Here’ White Feather offered, leaning towards her. ‘I will show you.’
He touched her temple, and Amaia closed her eyes, seeing a vision in her head of a great battle.
Thousands of women marching in formation across a large expanse of land, where the grass had been blackened to a dust by great heat. Using their collective force, they raised the worst kind of storm that was imaginable. A great monsoon, where huge waves drawn up from rivers and seas lashed around them, protecting them from outside forces. Snow swirled above their heads in a howling gale. Thunder and lightning raged, lighting up the sky in flashes above the great arches of pure fire that swirled and roared above heads of the marching army. Wearing no armour, the elements were all they needed for protection. And together, they faced their foe before them. A great shadow which shrouded the land. Together, they could wreak havoc upon the earth, with their powers collected in mass, they were formidable.
White Feather drew his hand back, and the vision faded. Amaia opened her eyes.
‘That’s absurd’ Amaia scoffed at the dramatic depiction he had shown her. ‘There’s no way that story could possibly be true. Armies of Weather Makers? Please. Our histories would have recorded such an event.’
White Feather smiled, humouring her with his silence.
‘I think’ Amaia began, ‘that whether or not Weather Makers were created, they exist to bring peace, not to create war.’
‘I suppose you must be right’ White Feather submitted. ‘In any case’ he went on changing the subject, ‘you said you would show me yours, once I showed you mine. I let you touch my wings, now you show me your magic.’
And so, for the second time, he prompted her, encouraging her to release her magic. And for the second time, she complied.
Amaia knelt on the ground, placing her hands splayed upon the earth, and from her fingertips, a frost began to spread. Covering the entire ground around where they sat and growing up the trees, to the very tips of each branch and to every leaf. Even the air around them began to grow cold, and as White Feather exhaled deeply, his breath came out as a fog.
Amaia looked up at him, drawing her hands back to her. The air gradually began to warm again, and the frost very slowly began to melt away.
White Feather smiled at her tenderly.
‘I want you to know’ he said, ‘that I will always be here for you. If there is need of me, if there is danger, I will be by your side, to help you in any way I can……always.’
Amaia stared at him hard, feeling warmth in her heart.
‘I know’ she breathed. ‘If there is anyone in this world I can trust the most, it is you.’

‘No! Please don’t hurt her again!’

The fairy pulled in vain at the chains that bound him, calling desperately. He watched as his Weather Maker was tortured, and killed, over and over again, and was utterly helpless to stop it.

Once again, the Weather Maker died, her body collapsed and broken on the floor. The king watched as her spirit lifted out of her body, rising up towards the ceiling of the large dark hall. And once again, as it had done the times before, the spirit dropped down, returning to the ground. The magical barrier placed upon the room, had once again not failed the king, the magical barrier that had been created by those strange figures in crow masks.

The spirit drew closer to the ground, and the dead body of the Weather Maker faded away, as the spirit created another. The king waited, and many minutes later, the Weather Maker opened her eyes again, this time in a new and undamaged body.

The fairy, her loyal friend lifted his head as she sat gingerly up, her hair was dark and grey like the stone of the hall she lay in, as were her eyes.

'Where am I?' she asked. The trauma she had suffered earlier, the great pain and distress she had endured, had been totally forgotten to her, and she was once again lost.

Her eyes drifted past the king and his soldier who stood nearby, and towards the being whose name she had forgotten, the fairy, which at this time looked like a normal man.

'Why is he chained up?' she asked, looking to the king. 'And who are you?'

The king knelt very slowly, coming down to her level.

'This is your last life' he told her. 'Do you see that woman there?'

The Weather Maker turned, seeing at the very far end of the hall, a great stone slab draped in thick and soft fabric, upon which lay a woman, who was utterly motionless. It looked almost as if she were dead. If it were not for the light colour in her cheeks; the Weather Maker would have believed that the woman had already passed.

'Who is that?' she asked. 'Is she alright?'

'She has been in a deep sleep for a long time now' the king replied calmly. 'I want you to wake her.'

'Me?' she glanced back towards the woman. Her hair was unnaturally bright, and grew as long as her body. Her nails also were very long. 'I wouldn't know how to wake her' the Weather Maker said. 'I don't even know what's wrong with her.'

The king made an indication to the silent soldier beside him. The soldier stepped forward and took her hand, lifting a metal device that looked like a small square box.

'What are you doing?' the Weather Maker asked in alarm, suddenly beginning to panic.

'You will make her better, or I will make you suffer' the king said behind the soldier.

The soldier forced her hand inside the box, turning a peg on the outside of the contraption, and the Weather Maker's hand inside the box was trapped. She was unable to help herself as the bones in her hand were crushed.

Feeling no remorse, the king watched. The silent soldier took the box off her, and made to grab her other hand.

'No please!' the nameless Weather Maker begged in agony. 'I don't know how to save her!'

'Then you will die' the king told her simply. His dark eyes shot to the silent soldier. 'Continue.'

Behind them, the fairy had cried out so much that his voice was hoarse.

When the Weather Maker was dead for the last time, the king turned his attention back to the fairy that was chained. 'Finish him off' he spoke shortly.
The soldier marched up to him.
The fairy looked up, too exhausted to even feel hate or anger. The soldier lifted a long blade concealed on his person. The fairy could only raise a single arm, a feeble attempt to protect himself.
The soldier thrust the knife swiftly between his ribs, puncturing his lung and heart. The fairy fell back as the soldier jerked the knife away, falling to his side on the cold, hard stone floor, he died within seconds.
The soldier wiped his blade clean, hiding it again beneath his cloak. Behind him the king went over to the tall doors that were the only entrance or exit to the large hall. He opened one of the great doors, and spoke to the soldier that waited on the other side.
'Take them away.'
Swiftly and with eyes averted, a small group of men hurried into the hall, lifting the dead bodies of the Weather Maker and the fairy, and very quickly mopping up the blood.
The silent soldier looked on.
Within minutes the hall had been cleaned and was emptied of all besides the king himself, and his soldier who stood nearby. The king's next order came short and sharp.
'Send the next one in.'

Chapter Fifty-Five
A Friend from the Past

The three waited in silence in the woods, hidden by the trees and completely invisible to anyone approaching them from the manor.
Farrell waited expectantly, and as Arlen had estimated, twelve minutes later, the gates to the manor opened and several mounted figures rode their way.
Farrell tensed, hand sliding to the hilt of his sword. He glanced around him, seeing some of the mercenaries hiding in the trees above them, arrows nocked.
They waited in tense silence as the soldiers drew closer, unknowingly riding to their end.
The soldiers entered the forest, riding at a gentle trot, above them the mercenaries all aimed at their targets. Arlen, Shawn and Farrell waiting on the ground behind the trees watched as the soldiers rode past them. And then Arlen whistled loudly.
The soldiers barely had time to turn in confusion at the source of the noise when the mercenaries fired their arrows, killing almost all of them in one blow. The remaining were picked off by the archers overhead as they tried to escape, but not getting very far. Arlen, Shawn and Farrell strode from their hiding places, checking the fallen men and finishing off those few that were still alive.

Farrell turned one of the men over, seeing the terror in him, knowing it was the end. The man tried to beg for his life, but Farrell quickly slit his throat, straightening up again and turning back to Arlen.
‘Take their armour’ Arlen said already beginning to undress one of the dead men as Shawn tried to calm and restrain some of the horses as they pranced and wandered about in confusion.
The other horses were quickly caught by the mercenaries who descended from the trees, undressing the dead men and putting on their armour.
Farrell placed the helmet over his head, mounting one of the horses and wheeling the animal around. It felt good to be riding a war horse again he thought.
Nearby, Arlen surveyed the scene briefly before calling out the order to ride forth, leaving the dead men where they had fallen, they left the forest, riding out into the open and towards the manor.
When they reached the gates, Arlen dismounted his horse quickly, talking in a murmur to the young soldier who guarded the gates. The instant the gates were opened by the young soldier, Arlen drove a knife deep into his throat.
The others dismounted their horses, throwing off their helmets so they may be recognised by the other mercenaries that attacked the manor from the back, sweeping through the garden and into the building.

It was a long journey back to the small town where Amaia grew up. They had travelled far, and for many days. By the time they reached the place, both were exhausted.
‘We’re here’ White Feather sighed wearily, ‘…at last.’
Amaia gazed onwards to the place she had once known as home. The place she had forgotten.
‘I don’t remember any of this’ Amaia spoke with sadness.
‘Don’t worry’ White Feather reassured her. ‘It will come back to you in time. But we need to get closer. It will help you remember.’
‘I've just thought of something’ Amaia voiced. She turned to White Feather. ‘We’ve been walking for so long all this way, why didn’t you shrink down in size? I could have carried you on my shoulder.’
‘And let you walk all this way alone?’ White Feather scoffed. ‘I already told you, I will share your burden, this one, and however more are to come in the future, no matter what they are.’
‘That is awfully kind of you’ Amaia said meekly. ‘I wish I could repay such kindness.’
‘Your safety and happiness are repayment enough’ White Feather replied with joy.
‘But you could have spared yourself the pain’ Amaia told him.
White Feather glided towards her, touching her chin.
‘And watch you suffer travelling this distance alone?’
‘There is nothing to gain by sharing in my discomfort.’
‘If I cannot help to ease your burden’ White Feather spoke, ‘then I shall share it. Like I already told you’
‘That’s very sweet of you’ Amaia said. ‘But foolish.’
‘Foolish’ White Feather repeated. ‘But pleasing.’

‘Pleasing?’
‘It pleases me to make you happy’ White Feather clarified. ‘However foolish.’
Amaia smiled. ‘You're funny.’
‘Come’ he said, taking her by the hand. ‘Let us take you home.’
As they drew closer to the small town, Amaia began to feel more and more nervous.
‘Are you alright Amaia?’ White Feather inquired, walking by her side, still holding her hand. ‘You seem tense.’
Amaia slowed to a stop, letting go of him.
‘I feel like I am walking into this town for the very first time. I know you tell me that I've been here before, I know that I told you of my past before I lost my memory. But…...’ she broke off. ‘I remember nothing of this place……so why do I feel so uneasy?’
‘Because’ White Feather said, grasping her shoulders lightly, ‘memories stir within you. It is normal to be nervous. It’s been so long since you’ve been here.’
‘I'm glad to have you by my side’ Amaia voiced. ‘I could not do this without you. This moment…. I’m just glad you're here.’
‘Come now’ White Feather teased. ‘Let us not waste time. You’ve been away from home for far too long as it is.’
‘Do you think my father will be here?’ Amaia asked.
‘Perhaps’ White Feather replied vaguely.
Amaia took a deep breath. ‘Then that makes me as nervous as ever.’
‘Why?’
‘Because’ Amaia glanced at the creature by her side. ‘The last years I knew him, he was not the man…was not the father I once knew him to be.’
She strode forwards, onwards towards her hometown.
They entered its ground, White Feather close behind her now, as Amaia explored the town, her old home, and reacquainted herself with her past.
‘It’s small’ Amaia said quietly, as they walked slowly by the houses.
‘It’s a small town’ White Feather replied.
‘It’s smaller than I remember it.’
‘You were younger back then’ White Feather replied. ‘Things would have seemed bigger to you.’
Amaia moved tentatively by the modest houses with their thatched roofs. There were no clear roads of any kind around them and between the houses, only dirt tracks.
‘It’s…’ Amaia began, looking about her, ‘it’s…’ She paused then, raising her head up towards the hilltop where there were two large manors, the kind of which could only have been owned by wealthy hands. Amaia glanced from one to the other. ‘One of these is mine’ she said.
Her pace began to quicken, as she headed towards one of the manors.
‘It’s this one’ she said.
‘What of the other?’ White Feather asked curiously beside her.
‘It belongs to my mother’s father……well…it did before he died. I don’t know who lives there now.’
‘You're beginning to remember?’ White Feather asked her, eyes lighting up.
‘Yes’ Amaia replied. ‘It’s slowly coming back to me.’

They entered the grounds of the manor. Amaia hesitated as they reached the path. She glanced either side of her at the fields. Once upon a time, Alastor lived here. Once upon a time he would graze upon the grass and prance around protectively around his mares and foals. Now, the fields lay empty, the grass overgrown and the fences neglected and falling apart.

Sadness filled Amaia's heart, seeing this place once so grand, now fallen into such ruins. She felt suddenly unhappy.

She walked forwards, down the path and towards the old home. Amaia entered through the front door, and stepped inside.

Inside, it felt dead, felt empty. There was no furniture, and dust covered most of what was around her, and the floors once beautiful and clean, were now muddied with footprints.

'This is not how I remember it' Amaia spoke, broken hearted. 'What happened to this place?'

'I imagine your father fell on hard times' White Feather replied sombrely from behind her. 'After……when you…'

The pair moved through the house silently, surveying everything around them. And Amaia…...

Amaia remembered.

She remembered these corridors where she used to run. She remembered how she was constantly told off by her father for it, and how she time and again ignored him.

And then she saw something, a painting.

Amaia stifled a sob, White Feather quickly rushed to her side, putting an arm around her shoulders.

They exchanged a glance, before looking back up at the painting.

The edges of the painting was dark like shadows, a gentle orange glow was in the centre, lighting up the small family of three in the middle. Farrell stood with his arm around Ramana, the two of them standing close, and between them, stood Amaia, still just a child. All three of them were smiling. All three of them looked happy.

'It's beautiful' Amaia whispered, not trusting her voice not to break as the tears ran down her cheeks. 'This is the first time I have seen my mother since that day.'

White Feather gazed mournfully at Amaia, squeezing her shoulder firmly.

He spoke suddenly. 'Someone's coming.'

Amaia wheeled around, seeing a female figure standing before her. Tall and beautiful and mature, she looked only a little older than Amaia.

'What are you doing here?' the woman spoke firmly.

'I…' Amaia glanced uncertainly towards White Feather, but remembered suddenly that he could not be seen by the woman. 'I was looking for…'

'Who?' the woman asked.

'Farrell' White Feather whispered encouragingly to Amaia. 'Just say you're looking for Farrell.'

'I'm looking for Farrell' Amaia told the woman.

'Well, he's not here' the woman frowned sternly. 'And you're trespassing.' The woman stared hard at her. 'Why do you have green hair?' she asked suddenly.

'I'm sorry…' Amaia said, holding her hands behind her back and staring at her feet shyly, feeling suddenly self-conscious. 'I was just…'

‘Where did you come from?’ the woman asked. ‘And who are you?’
‘I…my name is Amaia.’
The woman stiffened suddenly. ‘I knew an Amaia once’ she said, ‘so strange that you would have the same name.’
‘What?’
‘The girl in that painting’ the woman said. ‘The little girl with black hair, her name was Amaia. Something terrible happened to her…. gods each time I see this painting, I think of how much she looked like her mother…’
‘Gracie…?’ Amaia whispered in shock, as she suddenly realised who this was.
‘How do you know my name?’ the woman replied immediately, eyes snapping back to her.
‘I have to go’ Amaia said hastily, walking quickly past her.
Amaia ran through the house, heading back towards the front door, stumbling outside and gasping for air.
‘Amaia!’
She glanced around to see White Feather running after her.
‘Amaia wait!’
Amaia ran far from the home and down the hill, coming to hide on the edge of the town behind an old bakery. She was gasping and shaking, holding herself tightly, trying to calm herself down.
A moment later, White Feather arrived.
‘You can’t hide from me’ he sighed at her. ‘I feel your pain. I feel everything you do.’
‘I have to get away from here’ Amaia whispered, trembling. ‘I can’t face her…I can’t…she reminds me of all that I lost…of all that I once held dear…’
‘I know where to go’ White Feather told her. ‘I asked Gracie before I came to find you. She told me where your father went.’
‘You appeared to her?’
White Feather shrugged uncertainly. ‘She was a bit surprised to see me appear so suddenly’ he admitted. ‘She told me your father left several days ago. We have to hurry if we want to catch him up.’
‘Where did he go?’ Amaia asked him, straightening and following after him as White Feather began to walk away.
‘To find *you’* White Feather winked, glancing back at her.
He jogged into the open, heading towards an old man who, at that precise moment was walking by, leading two horses.
‘Excuse me’ White Feather said politely to the man as he skipped up to him. ‘What is your name?’
‘It’s Walter’ the old man replied immediately without pause.
‘Good’ White Feather nodded. ‘I’ll remember that. May we borrow these?’
The man glanced to the horses White Feather indicated behind him.
‘Why but of course’ he replied. ‘Here, take them both. I know you will look after them.’
‘How did you do that?’ Amaia asked him in a whisper once they had moved away, White Feather holding the reins of both the horses now.
‘I placed a spell upon him’ White Feather grinned at her teasingly.
‘You shouldn’t have done that’ Amaia frowned. ‘It’s dishonest.’

‘Oh relax’ White Feather waved her away. ‘It’s like I said, we’re only borrowing them. We’ll bring them back, definitely, and we’ll look after them along the way.’
Amaia stared miserably at the floor.
‘Go on then’ White Feather encouraged. ‘We cannot waste time. Your father is waiting to be found.’
Amaia resigned, mounted the already saddled horse.
‘It’s convenient that the man handed over these horses so easily’ Amaia said to him, ‘a trick like that could be useful again in the future.’
‘Indeed’ White Feather agreed, climbing into the saddle of the other horse. ‘If that particular ability was less restricted then it would be very useful, but unfortunately it only works on the impressionable. You know…the very young or very old. That man must have been in his fifties as least.’
Amaia glanced back towards the old man, who was now plodding away happily; completely oblivious to anything out of the ordinary that might have happened.
‘So where do we go now?’ she asked him.
‘Your father was heading to a town in the west to find Arlen. He is planning to ask him for help to look for you. I know the way.’
‘Which town?’
‘One called Stonegate.’
‘And Gracie told you that?’
‘She did’ White Feather nodded. ‘She told me everything I need to know; I can be very persuasive.’
‘Let’s hurry then’ Amaia said, feeling suddenly anxious. ‘I don’t want to waste any time.’
‘Before we go’ White Feather interrupted, ‘I need to steal some food.’
‘It’s not right to steal’ Amaia protested. ‘The horses are one thing, but just plain stealing…?’
‘Well, I doubt they’d want it back after we’ve eaten it’ White Feather replied curtly, ‘and anyway, it’s a long way to Stonegate. We need the food. Trust me; you’ll thank me when you get hungry.’

It was a full moon that night as they travelled. They rested little, and travelled swiftly. It was only a short time that it took them to reach their destination, a dingy little town set in an unremarkable location. White Feather advised Amaia that it would be best to wait until dawn before approaching, as the streets of that town were not a safe place to be.

Chapter Fifty-Six
Following the Trail

It was midday when the two entered the town the next day. White Feather remained visible, keeping close to Amaia for her safety, thought he kept his wings hidden. It couldn’t be denied that many gave the pair strange looks, their eyes lingering longer on Amaia, making her feel uncomfortable.

‘I don’t like this place’ Amaia whispered under her breath to White Feather as they walked.
‘I know’ White Feather replied quietly. ‘It’s not safe here’ he said glaring suspiciously about him at the people. ‘Stay close to me.’
Amaia reached down to hold White Feather’s arm. White Feather didn’t say anything, but he could feel Amaia’s grip was vice-like. He stopped suddenly and observed his surroundings.
‘What's wrong?’ Amaia asked him.
‘I'm thinking’ White Feather replied.
‘About what?’ Amaia glanced behind her to a scary looking man, before turning sharply away again.
‘How do we find your father?’ White Feather said aloud. ‘This town…it’s such a large place…when looking for one man.’
‘We should ask around’ Amaia said, and then immediately regretted it. ‘I don’t like this place’ Amaia said again.
White Feather frowned at her thoughtfully.
‘Hey pretty boy!’ called an unfriendly voice.
White Feather glanced around to a rough looking man, aged and scared.
‘You don’t belong around here’ the man shouted, hanging around a corner with his beefy arms folded. ‘I think you should make yourself scarce before you get hurt.’
White Feather snapped then, speaking in a harsh voice Amaia had never heard from him before. ‘And who’s going to hurt me? You?’
The man’s attention then drifted towards Amaia with hungry eyes. He didn’t say anything, only smirked.
‘Come on’ White Feather mumbled, putting an arm around Amaia and leading her away.
They wandered back and forth from place to place, White Feather questioning every shop owner, inn keeper, blacksmiths, armourers and anyone else they could find who might know something. Eventually they came to another inn; the both of them at this point were getting tired. They had not yet met a person who knew or had met either Farrell or Arlen, and at this point their spirits were beginning to dampen, but they carried on regardless.
‘Stay here’ White Feather whispered again, and Amaia waited outside as she had done several times before.
White Feather walked boldly into the building, striding up to the bar to speak to the inn keeper.
‘I'm looking for someone’ he said in a robotic voice, repeating the words he had said so many times before. ‘Can you help me?’
‘Depends if you be more specific’ the innkeeper replied in an equally bored tone, not looking up from what he was doing.
‘A man called Farrell’ White Feather said.
‘Never heard of him’ the barman droned on.
‘There’s another man I'm looking for also, named Arlen, have you heard of *him*?’
The barman paused and glanced up suddenly. ‘Yeah’ he said sounding surprised. ‘In fact, there were two people in here several days ago fighting, one of them was called Arlen. I remember because the other one was calling out his name, he kept saying how he didn’t want to fight.’

‘Do you know where they went?’ White Feather asked, now suddenly animated. Hope and excitement filled him inside.
‘No’ the innkeeper said, ‘but I know someone who does.’ He turned and called back to the kitchen behind him. ‘Karla!’
A second later, a woman entered through the doorway, she had long hair dyed a bright and artificial red, with heavy makeup around her eyes.
‘Yes?’ she asked curiously.
‘This young man wants to know where Arlen went’ the innkeeper explained.
‘Arlen?’ her eyes lit up at the sound of his name.
‘You know him?’ White Feather asked.
‘He and I were lovers’ Karla explained, ‘but he left me, to find his daughter.’
‘I know where his daughter is’ White Feather said eagerly. ‘Please, you have to tell me where Arlen is so that I may find him.’
‘I will tell you’ Karla nodded.
White Feather felt suddenly a sharp emotion inside him, one coming from Amaia. She was frightened. But he waited just a moment longer to hear the woman speak, before turning on his heel and running out the building.

Outside Amaia waited nervously, anxious for her guardian to return. She kept her head down, sticking close to the wall behind her and trying her best to keep out of sight and remain unnoticed. But it was not enough. A man approached her, one with a predatory gaze. Amaia began to feel uneasy, even more so than before.
‘Strange, to see a woman on her own’ the man remarked. ‘Especially in a place like this, it’s not safe around here for those who cannot protect themselves.’
‘I can protect myself’ Amaia said firmly back, sounding braver than she felt.
‘Is that right?’ the man said with a cruel smile, taking a step towards her.
‘Stay away from me!’ Amaia ordered, straightening and lifting her head.
‘What strange hair you have’ the man remarked. ‘Green hair. You must be a gypsy. You're certainly not from around here.’ He smiled again. ‘That means you won’t be missed.’
He grabbed her then, pulling her towards him.
Amaia screamed; trying to pull away and grasping the stranger’s hand with her own, trying to prize his fingers off her arm.
‘Let go!’
There was movement suddenly to her right. She didn’t at first comprehend what had happened until after it was all over. The man that had grabbed her stumbled back. He straightened suddenly to state at White Feather who had appeared at Amaia’s side. Amaia noticed then there was blood gushing from the man’s throat. He collapsed, and didn’t move again.
‘Oh gods…’ Amaia breathed, clamping her hands over her mouth and stepping back. She glanced quickly to the side towards White Feather, seeing a flash of a concealed blade in his hand. A tiny knife that was needle thin and sharp.
‘You killed him’ she gasped in shock and disbelief.

White Feather didn't answer. He quickly tucked away his blade, hiding it again on his person before grabbing Amaia roughly by the hand and pulling her with him as he ran, back to where they left their horses.
'I was afraid of this' he was saying as they darted through the narrow streets. 'We've stayed here too long. This town is not safe.'
'But why…?'
'I heard their whisperings' White Feather glared back. 'They want to sell you. I think I've just made them angry.'
'Sell? Them? You mean there's more?'
'We've been watched for quite some time. Quickly now, get on' White Feather said when they had reached their horses.
Amaia mounted hers.
'I know where your father and Arlen went' White Feather told her hastily. 'They went north to a town called Dilston.'
'I know the one.'
'It's in that direction' White Feather said pointing off into the horizon. 'You must hurry.'
'You're not coming?'
'I have to stay here. Those men will come after you if I don't.'
Amaia hesitated.
'Don't worry' White Feather smiled confidently then. 'I will find you again. Trust me. Now go!'
Amaia wheeled the horse around and kicked her heels hard into its sides, sending the beast into a gallop.
She ran across the open plains alone, shortly after, disappearing into woodland. She slowed her horse down when the forest began to thicken, eventually dismounting altogether and walking alongside the horse as she led it onwards. Only when she was sure she could not be found by any man, did she stop to rest.

The hours dragged on, and Amaia began to worry. White Feather still had not returned.
The hour began to grow late, and only after the sun had set, did White Feather at last appear.
At first, she was frightened by the looming shadow that moved towards her between the trees, but when she saw the silhouette light up by magic, she saw White Feather, and breathed a sigh of relief.
'I thought I'd lost you for good' she told him. And then she gasped, seeing him clearer.
The skin around one of his eyes was heavily bruised, his lip was split and there were several cuts and red marks over his face.
'I'm fine' White Feather said before she could express her worries. 'Just sleep' he told her. 'We've got a long way to go yet.'

That night, Amaia slept on blankets laid out on the forest floor. It was warm enough to not need cover. Everything around her was utterly still and silent. Not even the insects or owls called tonight.
Amaia woke gradually some hours later, her mind fraught with worry for White Feather. When she opened her eyes, the night was in full bloom. Amaia saw that White Feather had

made a small fire a short distance away. She lay her on her side watching him as he sat on a tree stump with his back to her. She saw his silhouette as he moved in the firelight. He had lifted his shirt, and was tending to an injury at his side.
Amaia watched him. He had a needle and thread, and appeared to be sewing closed a wound, grimacing with pain.
Amaia let herself relax, and her world began to darken once more.
The next morning, White Feather let her sleep, and when she at last woke, it was midday.
'Why didn't you wake me earlier?' she asked him.
'You needed your rest' he replied simply. 'You were exhausted.' He reached towards her, stroking her green hair back briefly before rising to his feet. 'Come on' he said. 'I've already tended to the horses. They are ready to go.'
Amaia noticed that when he moved, he seemed to do so very stiffly, as if he was in great discomfort, but was trying his best to conceal it.
The next few hours that passed were uneventful as they travelled. They were none the less glad to reach their destination, a town that was large and flourishing and beautiful. It was everything the one they had left wasn't. Dilston, the town that prospered.
Amaia had no will to admire her surroundings. She was exhausted. Having brooded for many years behind stone walls, where the further she had travelled was the next room; the journey of such a great distance was taking its toll on her.
'I know exactly where to go' White Feather was saying. 'That red haired woman at the inn told me where Arlen would be.'
Before she knew it, Amaia was in a strange building, standing before a strange man.

'Well well well' Danior smiled in amusement. 'This is a peculiar predicament.'
'How long ago did he leave here?' Amaia asked.
'It was several days ago. I sent them to a remote village to find you. And suddenly here you are.'
'What village? Please, you must tell us.'
'I will' Danior replied to her. 'But you are looking tired and hungry. I will have some rooms prepared for you, you will rest, and then you will eat. And you will have your wounds looked at' he said to White Feather. 'No point in objecting' he quickly added waving him away. 'I'm not blind.'
'And what do you ask in return for such kindness?' Amaia asked suspiciously, as White Feather beside her slumped his shoulders, biting his lip.
'Nothing.'
'Nothing?'
'See it as my good deed for the day' Danior answered. 'I am leaving these shores to travel to lands far from here. War is coming you know, and I don't want to be around when it happens.'
'War?' Amaia echoed fearfully.
'I am leaving later today' Danior went on as if he had not heard her. 'You won't see me again. My servant will take you to your rooms. You can stay as long as you like.'
White Feather glared around suspiciously as they were led away, fearful of a trap.

Amaia slept deeply on one of the soft beds they had been given. White Feather however did not rest. He stayed awake the whole time, watching over her, looking out the window, listening, walking up and down the corridor outside the room before returning again to her side.
The next day Amaia was fully rested, and the both of them had eaten all they could that they were given. White Feather insisted on trying everything first as he still suspected a trick of some kind. When they had finished, another servant led them to a courtyard where their horses waited for them. They had been fed and rested and now carried full bags on their backs.
'Supplies to last you several days' the servant explained.
Amaia and White Feather exchanged an uncertain look.
'Why would you do so much for us?' Amaia asked the man.
The servant shrugged. 'These are our master's orders. He is a cruel man, but some days he shows his better side. You were simply lucky enough to pick the right day.'
Amaia felt disappointed at the simplicity of all of it. She mounted her horse without another word, and she and White Feather set off, to start the next part of their journey.

Chapter Fifty-Seven
A New Family

When they arrived at their destination, a village to the north-east of Dilston named Augsburg, one of the first things they saw was a woman on her knees crying.
'I wonder what's happened here' White Feather said, leaning forward on his horse.
'She looks…' Amaia began, '…heartbroken.'
'We should comfort her' White Feather suggested. 'We may be able to help.'
They dismounted and walked their horses slowly towards her.
'Um…excuse me' Amaia began tentatively.
The woman lifted her head; she held a handkerchief to her red and puffy eyes, blinking several times to clear the tears.
'Who is that?' she asked in a hoarse voice.
'My name is Amaia' she spoke, 'and this is my companion White Feather. We've travelled a long way to get here.'
'White Feather?' the woman repeated huskily. 'That's an odd name.'
'It is rather unusual' White Feather agreed.
'Where have you come from?' the woman asked them weakly, rising to her feet and dabbing at her eyes again.
Amaia hesitated.
'It's…' Amaia began. 'A long way from here…'
The woman brushed her hair back, staring at them. 'A girl…' she said, looking at Amaia more closely now. 'You're so young, barely even twenty. What are you doing travelling such a long way?'
'I was looking for my father. I understand he came through this village.'

‘Your father?’ the woman repeated. She blinked several times as she thought. ‘Why…is he not at home? Why are you looking for him?’
‘He’s missing’ Amaia said.
‘And where is your mother? Shouldn’t you be staying home with her?’
‘She’s dead.’
The woman dipped her head. ‘I'm sorry’ she mumbled. ‘I didn’t mean to pry. It’s none of my business, really.’ She raised her head again. ‘I have…lost my daughter.’
‘Recently?’ White Feather interrupted.
The woman’s face screwed up; tears began rolling down her cheeks again.
‘I'm sorry’ Amaia said quickly. ‘We didn’t mean up upset you.’
‘It’s alright’ the woman sobbed. ‘You didn’t know.’
‘What's your name?’ White Feather asked her, cocking his head and placing his hands upon his hips.
‘Anya’ she whimpered. She hesitated for a brief moment. ‘Where are you two heading from here?’
‘We don’t know’ White Feather told her.
‘We came here to look for my father. We were told he would be here, but we don’t know where exactly.’
‘I don’t suppose’ Anya spoke slowly, ‘you would like to have a meal with us? You must be hungry after travelling so far. My husband and I are both good cooks.’
‘That sounds wonderful’ White Feather said jovially before Amaia could speak. ‘I'm starving. What about you Amaia?’

‘Who are these people?’ the old man said as White Feather and Amaia entered the kitchen of the modest home.
‘They are travellers, from Ketts’ Anya replied. ‘I've invited them over for a meal.’
The old man smiled kindly at the two. ‘Hello. My name is Roy’ he said to them. ‘Welcome to our home.’
‘I'm Amaia’ she bowed her head. ‘And this is White Feather.’
‘White Feather?’ Roy repeated. ‘That is an unusual name.’
‘It is’ White Feather agreed. ‘A lot of people tell me so.’
‘You must have had quite an ordeal to have travelled all this way’ Roy said to them. ‘What happened to you?’ he asked turning to White Feather.
‘Oh’ White Feather said; touching his face briefly where the bruises and cuts still remained. His split lip hadn’t fully healed yet either. ‘Just…a little difficulty. Nothing to worry about, really.’
‘What happened?’
‘I…fell out of a tree’ White Feather replied bashfully, scratching the back of his head. ‘Silly I know.’
Roy smiled uncertainly at him, clearly unconvinced. ‘Would you both like to have a seat?’
He led them through the home and towards the kitchen; Amaia took in the house around her as they made their way. It was a simple home, but cosy, and at a glance Amaia could see the love within it. There were little decoration and ornaments about the place, things that looked as if they had been hand-made as gifts. There were brightly painted wooden carvings of

different animals, flowers, some of which were dried and preserved or pressed, pictures painted within heart-shaped frames.
'It's nice here' White Feather commented as they made their way to the next room. 'Cosy.'
'I'm glad you like it' Roy said back to him. 'Here' he said reaching the kitchen and indicating to the table in the centre. 'Please sit down.'
Amaia and White Feather sat side by side at the table, White Feather reached towards Amaia, grasping her hand briefly beneath the table in reassurance, before letting go again. Amaia smiled gratefully back at him. A short time later, Anya came to them carrying a tray of food she had been preparing nearby. She placed it on the table before the two of them.
'That was quick' White Feather noted.
'I always have food prepared' Anya told them. 'I would always have good food ready for my children.'
'You have children?' White Feather asked.
'We did' Anya replied. She lowered her eyes. 'Eat' she said hurriedly. 'You must be hungry.'
Amaia and White Feather both ate quickly. They had carried enough food with them on their horses, kindly given to them by Danior, that would have lasted them days. But they had been so eager to reach their destination, they had eaten very little of it.
Amaia and White Feather shared their food together, this time White Feather did not insist on trying the food before Amaia, as he had done when Danior had served them. Here he felt safe, and Amaia in turn, felt safe also.
When they had eaten their fill, they both thanked Anya and Roy graciously and left the home to begin searching for Farrell and Arlen, their horses they had left tied up outside.
Amaia felt safe here to wander off alone, and White Feather allowed her to do this. Each spent over an hour asking questions of every person they could find, and when Amaia and White Feather met up again by their horses, they were able to piece together what had happened.
Farrell and Arlen had indeed come this way, accompanied by several other men who looked like soldiers. They vanished suddenly and without trace, taking with them a young woman named Annabel, and heading in an unknown direction.
'Why would they kidnap someone?' Amaia said aloud, speaking more to herself than anyone else.
'I'm sure there's a perfectly logical explanation for it' White Feather replied nonchalantly, sitting on the wall beside her.
Amaia furrowed her brow, holding her chin and deep in thought.
'Oh' she said after a time. 'It's no use.' She huffed, leaning back. 'How on earth are we supposed to find them? We have no idea even which direction they went, or where they were going…. they left so suddenly.' She gritted her teeth.
Beside her, White Feather watched her silently.
Nearby the horses waited patiently, heads low and tails flicking lazily. They were tied to the fence to stop them from wandering.
White Feather looked up suddenly, seeing a figure approaching them. It was Anya.
'Did you find what you were looking for?' the lady asked them politely.
'Not entirely.' Amaia turned to her. 'Only that the people we are looking for travelled with a band of men and that they left swiftly, taking with them a young woman called Annabel.'

Anya's expression saddened at that.
'My daughter' she said.
'What?' Amaia breathed.
'Annabel is my daughter. She…she was taken…'
'Your daughter...?' Amaia mumbled. 'Taken…?'
'Yes' Anya replied quietly.
Amaia bowed her head then, feeling suddenly mixed emotions. 'My father would never do anything bad like that. I'm sure there is a good reason for what happened.'
'Perhaps there is' Anya replied meekly.
'We should be going' Amaia said, rising and moving towards her horse.
'Where?' Anya asked.
'I…. I don't know' Amaia admitted. 'But I'm sure we'll work it out, together' she said glancing to White Feather.
'Where was your father heading?'
'I don't know.'
'Which direction did he go?'
'I don't know' Amaia said again.
Anya paused.
'I don't suppose' she spoke slowly, 'you would like to stay with us for a while.'
'I'm sorry?'
'You see' Anya bowed her head, shoulders hunched; 'I've been feeling low lately, as has my husband. Losing our daughter…it's been hard. We don't know what happened to her, where she is or even if she will ever come back. We're both worried sick for her, and our house has become so empty. First our son years ago, and now our daughter, and we have fallen into despair.' Anya raised her head, meeting Amaia's eyes now. 'It would be wonderful to have you stay with us…. if you want. If you have nowhere else to go. The thing is…you look a bit like our Annabel, and you are about the same age…' She broke off then, staring at Amaia hard. 'It's so strange that you came here' she mumbled, 'it's almost like fate.'
'That's awfully kind of you' Amaia said hastily, 'really, but we don't want to be a bother.'
'Oh, it's no bother at all' Anya said. 'You have nowhere else to stay as far as I can tell. Well…we have an inn here, it's only small but……I would like it if you two would stay with us. We won't charge you or anything…we will look after you and….' Anya shrugged helplessly. 'My husband and I would appreciate it.' She fell silent for a moment. 'I'm sorry' Anya said in a whisper. 'This must seem a bit strange to both of you, but…I've lost both of my children, my daughter very recently. I just feel…like…I need to take my mind off things. Do you understand?' she asked them with pleading eyes.
'Yes' Amaia nodded. 'We're both very grateful. Thank you, we would both like to stay…...as long as we're not getting in the way.'
'You won't get in the way' Anya reassured. 'Believe me, our home has been far more chaotic when my children…' she broke off. 'Come with me' she said smiling. 'I will cook for you.'

That evening the four of them had a warm meal together, Roy and Anya, White Feather and Amaia. They talked and laughed and joked and smiled, acting as if they were a true family

and had known each other for years. Roy and Anya found the both of them intriguing, especially White Feather, with his stranger mannerisms.
'This food is delicious' Amaia beamed. 'I love it!'
'Roast duck' Anya smiled, resting her elbows on the table. 'Our very own.'
When the meal was finished and cleared away, Anya leant forward, speaking to Amaia and White Feather.
'I don't want to ask any awkward questions' Anya began, 'but are the two of you…together?'
'Oh no' Amaia shook her head quickly. 'We're just….'
'I'm a companion' White Feather finished. He shot Amaia a sly look.
'He's just a friend' Amaia clarified.
'Alright' Anya said uncertainly. 'I just wanted to make sure. Can I show you to your rooms then?'
'Of course,' White Feather glowed.
They followed Anya upstairs, and she showed them to two separate rooms.
'This is my daughter's room' Anya said to Amaia. 'You can stay here. And this…' she said walking down the corridor a few steps away, 'is my son's room.' She turned to White Feather. 'This is your room.'
'This is all very kind of you' Amaia said. 'I don't know how to thank…'
'It's ok' Anya smiled kindly. 'Just…tell me if you need anything. At any time, day or night. We won't mind, honestly.'
'We will' Amaia said gratefully.
'Ok' Anya nodded. She hesitated for a moment, glancing to each of them. 'Goodnight' she told them. 'Sleep well.'
She drifted down the corridor and back downstairs.
White Feather spoke to Amaia.
'Are you ok?' he asked her.
'Yes', she said. 'I trust them if that's what you mean.'
'Me too. I'll be glad at least to sleep on a bed inside tonight. I don't mind sleeping outside, but the nights can get chilly sometimes. You know?'
'Well,' Amaia said to him. 'Goodnight.'
'Goodnight Amaia' White Feather replied, he reached towards her, brushing her cheek with the back of his hand. 'We're safe here' he told her. 'I don't know why, but I feel sure of it.'
Amaia nodded quietly.
'See you in the morning' White Feather said, hugging her briefly, before turning away and heading to the room he had been given.
Amaia walked in the other direction, heading to her own.

That night, her sleep was restless. She tossed and she turned, eventually waking some unknown time later. Amaia lay in the unfamiliar bed, head turned to the side and staring about in the dark at the unfamiliar environment around her.
After sometime she decided to get up, wandering down the corridor and using the wall to guide her in the dark, she headed to the room where White Feather slept. Opening the door slowly to stop it squeaking, she peered into the room.

He lay there on his side utterly still, his breathing gradual. The moonlight shining through the window above his bed lay over his body, lighting up his features. She stepped towards him, moving carefully across the unfamiliar wooden floors, trying not to make them creak. She stood over him, watching. He looked so peaceful lying there.
Her eyes travelled down his body. She reached forward, pulling back the sheet to expose his chest.
Her heart constricted as she saw clearly the injuries she has only briefly glimpsed before. There were wounds all over his body, cuts, bruises and larger gashes that had been sown back together.
He must have suffered greatly, must have been in pain, and had never once shown it, never once mentioned it or complained. Amaia could only image exactly what had happened, and it was all to save her. She felt suddenly swamped with guilt and shame.
She stepped back suddenly, letting go of the sheet she held and gasping slightly. White Feather's eyes were open. He was watching her.
He sat up slowly, gazing at her calmly.
'Could you not sleep?' he asked her gently.
'No' Amaia breathed. 'I… I couldn't sleep alone. I was worrying about you.'
'I'm only in the next room' he reasoned.
'I know…but…'
'You've gotten used to having me around?'
She glanced up at him with large eyes.
'Come here' White Feather whispered to her, shuffling back on the bed and pulling the sheet back so that she could lie down.
Amaia stepped forward, sitting on the bed, lifting her legs up and lying down. White Feather let the thin sheet fall over the both of them, he lay down with her, holding her close as he had done so before, in the many nights after a long day of travelling. Amaia instantly felt warmth radiating from him, and a strange light touch against her shoulder that she knew were his delicate wings.
'Maybe I was cold' she said, holding herself tightly.
'Maybe' he replied softly.
'Will we try to look for them again in the morning?'
'Yes', White Feather said. 'In the morning. But now, you must sleep.'
Amaia listened to him. She closed her eyes, feeling instantly at peace, feeling instantly safe. With White Feather by her side.
A short time later, Anya went upstairs to check on them. She began to panic when she saw that Amaia was not in her bed.
'It's alright' Roy said, comforting her when she came to him. 'She's in the other room with White Feather.'
The two stood in the hallway, looking into the room they had given to White Feather. They saw Amaia and White Feather sleeping together, White Feather holding Amaia close to him. The both of them sound asleep.
'What an odd couple' Anya said in a distant voice. 'I wonder who they really are...'

The next morning, Amaia woke feeling happy and rested. She turned over, seeing White Feather lying behind her. He was already wide awake, smiling at her.
They went downstairs, intending to go outside and begin searching for Farrell and Arlen. But they were stopped by Anya, who insisted that they had breakfast before they leave. White Feather happily accepted before Amaia could object. They ate quickly and left the home to begin their search. They again asked everyone they could find about the group that passed through the village and taken Annabel, but as it had been the day before; they did not learn anything that may point them in the right direction of finding them.
They had simply become ghosts.
What they had learnt from the people they spoke to, created more questions than answers, and they were at a dead end.
The entire day they wandered about the village, trying to find out what they could. They finally came to rest many hours later, sitting upon a low wall and watching the sun set.
'I feel so lost' Amaia grumbled. 'What do we do now?'
'I don't know' White Feather said. 'I don't know.'
They sat there in silent for a while, until they were interrupted by Anya, who had been watching them.
'Did you find what you were looking for?' she asked them for the second time.
'No' Amaia shook her head. 'We don't know where to go from here. We've lost him. Perhaps for good.'
'Are you going home then?' Anya asked them.
'I have no home to go to' Amaia answered miserably. 'There is nothing there for me anymore.'
'Do you want to stay with us?' Anya offered.
Amaia lifted her head. 'I don't want to be a bother.'
'It's nothing really' Anya smiled. 'We need a distraction after losing our daughter.'
'How long can we stay here?' Amaia asked her.
'For as long as you want' Anya said. 'In truth, I would be sad if you left us.'
'Well,' White Feather shrugged. 'That's that then, for the meantime, this is where we stay.'

Ten months pass

Chapter Fifty-Eight
Early Mornings

'It may take a few days to a few weeks to heal' Amaia was saying to the old man, winding the bandage around his leg to limit any movement that might cause further damage. 'Rest and keep your leg as still as possible, especially in these first few days. Keep your leg raised' she said tying up the bandage, 'and supported on a pillow as much as possible, it will help reduce any swelling.' She rose to her feet. 'How do you feel?'

‘Much better thanks to you’ the old man chuckled foolishly at her. ‘I'm very grateful for your help.’
‘Do you need me to help assist you back home?’ Amaia asked him.
‘No no’ the old man waved at her. ‘I’ll be quite alright.’
‘Please take this’ Amaia said to him, moving away quickly as she headed to another room, returning moments later with a crutch in her hands.
‘Now really’ the man hastened, ‘there’s no need…’
‘I know you don’t want it’ Amaia said offering it to him, but you can’t hop all the way home, and I doubt you wish to be carried.’
The man faltered at this.
‘Take it’ Amaia said, presenting it to him. ‘You’ll be glad later that you did.’
‘Thank you miss,’ the man bowed his head, taking the crutch reluctantly and holding it in the correct position beneath his arm as he rose gingerly to his feet. ‘I feel better already.’
‘Remember’ she added as the old man made to leave, ‘to fully recover as quickly as possible, you should do gentle exercises before trying anything too strenuous, or else you might make the injury worse.’
‘I’ll be sure to remember that’ the old man said, tipping his hat to her. ‘Thank you again, and good day.’
Amaia smiled at him, holding the door open as he hobbled awkwardly out of the house.
She watched him go, still holding the grin on her face.
‘How does such an old man suffer a hamstring injury?’ White Feather said from behind her. ‘What on earth was he doing? I’d love to know.’
‘Work on the farm isn’t easy’ Amaia said, closing the door. ‘Even the very old must do it if they want to eat.’
‘Still…’ White Feather said in a distant voice, staring hard into the door as if he could still see the old man hobbling away outside through the wood. ‘I’d love to know.’
‘If you're that curious then why didn’t you ask him?’
‘Oh?’ White Feather gleamed slyly at her. ‘That would spoil the mystery…that would spoil the *fun*.’
‘You're ridiculous’ she shook her head at him.
‘And you're cute!’ he squeaked.
He rushed up to her, giving her a quick squeeze, and poking her on the end of the nose.
‘How delightful’ he giggled.
‘Are you two at it again?’ Anya asked as she entered the room. ‘I know you said before that you were not in love, but you can’t keep your hands off each other.’
‘No’ Amaia hastened, blushing furiously. ‘It’s...it’s not like that!’
‘I *do* love her’ White Feather told Anya, hugging Amaia again. ‘As a sister as a mother as a daughter as a friend…as a….as a….’ he smiled. ‘Companion…’ he finished, leaning into her and closing his eyed contentedly.
‘*He* can’t keep his hands off *me’* Amaia interjected, returning to Anya’s point.
‘You never complained about it before’ White Feather whispered teasingly into her ear, leaning heavily on her shoulders.
‘Stand up straight’ she told him. ‘I can’t take your weight.’

He gave her a quick peck on the cheek before straightening up again, smirking happily at her as Anya giggled at the both of them.
'I love your interactions' Anya said to them calming, 'the both of you bring so much joy to our home. We're so happy to have you both here…and for so long.'
'Well, it's good to know you haven't grown tired of us' White Feather bowed to her.
'We could never' Anya sighed happily back. 'I just wanted to tell you; you both have done such a huge amount for us in the short time you've been here. How is it that you know so much?' she asked Amaia. 'About healing?'
'I…' Amaia began awkwardly, '…learnt a lot in books.'
'They must have been very good books indeed.'
'Well,' Amaia smiled shyly, holding her hands behind her back and hunching her shoulders. 'I had a lot of time to study them.'
'Well we're very grateful' Anya nodded to her. 'It's very good to have such a skilled healer in our little village.'
'I'm glad you think so' Amaia said. 'I'm just grateful to be able to help. I always wanted to care for others, when I was little, I used to bring animals home and care for them if they were injured. I brought a baby bird home once that had fallen out of its nest. It was named Yayew.'
'I never realised you enjoyed helping animals so much.'
'I get the same satisfaction from helping people' Amaia smiled.
'In that case I have a job for you. One of the horses has cut itself on a barbed wire fence and needs some attention before the injury gets any worse. Can you do that?'
'Of course,' Amaia nodded eagerly. 'I'll be right there.'
She gathered all the things she might need in a bag, and left the house in a hurry, in her haste bumping into a figure along the way and nearly knocking herself over.
'Simon' she gasped, gathering herself. 'I'm so sorry, please excuse me.'
'Wait a minute!' he shouted after her as she made to leave.
'I'm a bit busy I'm afraid' she called back to him, barely pausing to speak. 'I can't stop.'
'When are you not busy?' he persisted.
'Another time Simon' she waved to him. 'Bye now!'
She didn't see the way his shoulders slumped and the disappointment on his face as she made her way onwards. White Feather did though, as he sat on her shoulder shrunken in size, completely invisible to all but Amaia. The man's sadness really bothered him; he didn't know why at first, but after a few seconds of thought he realised.
It's because it was genuine.
White Feather faced Amaia, wondering if he should say something, but thought better of it. Her mind was elsewhere now, on more immediate tasks.
She came to the field where the injured horse was, seeing a deep gash in its flank.
'Poor thing' Amaia cooed, putting her bag down.
She approached the horse slowly, moving with her arms open to make sure it saw her so that she didn't startle it.
The horse allowed her to approach, and Amaia looked at the wound.
'It shouldn't be too hard to fix' she said out loud. 'I'll have this done in no time.'

She took the horse to the edge of the field and tied it with a rope to the fence so that it could not move around too much. Then she proceeded to clean the wound, applied a paste to dull the pain, and began to sew it up.
White Feather watched her as she worked, growing bored after a time and finding fun in distracting her.
'White Feather!' Amaia scolded, flicking at him as he swung back and forth before her face, hanging onto a section of her hair as he did so. 'Will you behave yourself, you're like a naughty child.'
'I only want you to smile' he said in his defence. 'You were making the most ridiculous face earlier as you worked with that needle. If the weather changes when you're frowning like that, then you'll be stuck like that forever.'
'That's just and old wives tale' Amaia sighed in amusement.
'It's ok now' White Feather beamed up at her as he stood on her open palms, leaning forward and touching her lips, 'because now you are smiling.'
She lifted her hands closer to her face, nuzzling into him as he giggled back at her.
'I love you, you silly little thing.'
'I love you too' he replied, awash inside with emotion.
'Come on' she said, dropping her hands and letting him float in the air before her, wings fluttering. 'We've got work to do on the farm.'
They returned to the home they now shared with Anya and Roy, dropping off the bag Amaia had brought with her. White Feather returned to his original size, making himself visible again.
'How is the horse?' Anya spoke up.
'He's fine' Amaia replied. 'I've cleaned the wound and sewn it, but it will take time to heal.'
'Thank you' Anya said gratefully.
'I'd remove the barbed wire in that field though' Amaia added. 'Or else the same thing might happen again.
'I'll do it' Roy said, rising from his seat at the table. 'I'll go now.'
He gave her a pat on the shoulder as he went by, smiling kindly at her. Amaia felt warmth in her heart as he did this, feeling a strong bond between them. She was truly happy here, and felt at home.
'What are you doing now?' Anya asked her when Roy had gone.
'The field needs clearing, the fences need fixing' Amaia began, 'eggs from the chickens need to be collected, the apples need picking, the cows need milking….so much to do…so much to do….'
'Well don't stay out too late' Anya told her. 'I'm cooking a lovely meal and I'd hate for you to miss it or have to eat it cold.'
'But Anya' Amaia said, 'your meals are always lovely.'
'Oh stop' Anya waved her away. 'Now hurry and do whatever it is you need to do before it gets dark. We've only got a few more hours of light left now.'
Amaia nodded to her, grinning widely. She hurried back outside towards the shining sun, and went to find her first task.

Sometime later, she was kneeling before the broken fence with her green hair tied up and nails held in her mouth. She worked quickly to get the job done so she could move onto the next and get as much finished as possible before the day's end.

Amaia glanced up briefly towards White Feather, who was in the middle of the field, entertaining a small hoard of children. They played games together and laughed and had fun, Amaia pausing for a moment to watch them, feeling content. All the children in the village loved White Feather; they seemed to gravitate towards him, finding his little quirks amusing.

White Feather caught one of the children, tickling her as she made to flee, before lifting her up and putting her on his shoulders. She giggled, grabbing him by his ears as he held her feet to stop her falling off.

'How's the view up there?' White Feather called to her.

'I love it!' the girl giggled back. 'I wish I was always this tall.'

'You will be one day.'

'But I want it now.'

He laughed at that. The other children around him played with the toys he had made for them. Little butterflies made out of painted feathers and attached to wires so that they danced in the breeze, colourful ribbons tied to the ends of sticks, beautiful wheels painted in bright colours that they chased down the hill.

Amaia returned her attention back to the fence, placing the nail over the correct spot, and hammering it in, careful to not hit her fingers.

She continued to work for many minutes without interruption, until something happened. There was a loud bang, a scream from a horse, and the shed near the centre of the field collapsed. The loud bang had sounded like a firecracker. White Feather had none on him, the children weren't allowed them, but some of the older ones in the group were more mischievous.

Amaia dropped what she was doing, rising slowly to her feet and staring at the fallen shed. She suddenly felt a great pain in her legs and waist, though there was nothing around her that caused it. And then she noticed with a jolt to the heart, that White Feather was trapped beneath the fallen shed, lying on his front with his legs trapped.

She ran to him as fast as she could, falling to her knees before him.

'White Feather!' she grabbed the beam that trapped him, trying hard to lift it. The children behind her watched silently, none of them had been hurt.

'White Feather!' Amaia cried, her voice shaking. 'White Feather, grow smaller!'

'I can't' he gasped, the dust from the earth around his mouth was blown back as he breathed. 'Not when I'm in pain…'

'I'll get you out' she said, her voice breaking, 'I have to.'

She rose to her feet, trying with all her might to lift the beam off him. White Feather turned his head towards her, cheek resting on the ground, smiling up at her as she struggled.

'It's ok' he said calmly to her. 'Don't panic. Please.'

'I should be the one comforting you' she shot back. 'You dam fool.' She turned to the children behind her, calling out to them. 'Quickly! Go get help!'

They instantly scattered, and Amaia returned her attention back to the beam, shaking with the effort to move it, as she did so, her fingers bled. But despite her best attempts, she could only lift the beam a few inches, before dropping it again.

‘Damit I'm not strong enough’ she sobbed. ‘I can’t move it!’
White Feather smiled at her again with gentle eyes, reaching out a hand and grasping her arm lightly.
‘Be still’ he said to her. ‘I’ll be alright.’
‘White Feather…’
‘What are we eating tonight anyway?’
‘W-what?’
‘I'm getting hungry’ he said watching her. ‘What are we eating?’
‘I don’t know’ she laughed through her tears, unable to stop herself. ‘You say the silliest of things…’
‘There’ he said smiling at her, ‘that was all I wanted.’
Amaia realised with shock that she was smiling too. She let out a sigh and sat back on her heels, kneeling on the ground beside White Feather.
‘Are you ok?’ she whispered to him. ‘It doesn’t hurt too much does it?’
‘Well…’ White Feather began, ‘I’d be lying if I said I hadn’t been in more comfortable positions.’
Amaia couldn’t stop herself from smiling at him and shaking her head in amusement.
She stiffened slightly then, seeing a figure running towards them, followed by the children. The figure was Simon.
‘What's happened here?’ he asked out of breath, skidding to a stop.
‘Silly man’ White Feather shot at him before Amaia could speak. ‘I would have thought it was obvious.’
‘Please help him’ Amaia begged. ‘Please.’
‘And take your time’ White Feather added speaking to the dirt as he rested his head on the ground, watching an ant go by. ‘Really. I'm not in any particular rush to be anywhere.’
Simon stood over him, bending down and grasping the wooden beams with both hands and heaving, groaning with the effort as he lifted.
White Feather grasped Amaia by the arm and she pulled him forwards, helping him up as Simon held the beam for as long as he could, letting it fall back down when White Feather had crawled out.
‘Are you ok?’ Amaia breathed, fussing over him.
‘Yes’, White Feather gasped, resting on his side, propped up on an elbow. ‘I just…need to rest here a while.’
‘How did this happen?’ Simon asked, kneeling beside them.
‘One of the horses got spooked by the firecracker’ White Feather said, ‘and panicked, rearing and falling into the shed as he fled. Luckily the horse is fine’ he finished. ‘It ran away.’
‘Unlucky that *you* were hurt’ Simon spoke firmly.
‘Oh, don’t worry about me’ White Feather chuckled. ‘Just pretend that I am not here. I don’t want to cause a fuss.’
‘Do you want me to carry you home?’ Simon offered.
‘No no’ White Feather hastened. ‘I can walk by myself. Just…let me rest here a while.’

‘I was so frightened for you’ Amaia said weakly to him once they returned home a short while later.
They were upstairs in Annabel’s old bedroom.
It had begun to grow dark outside. White Feather had refused help to be carried home, instead getting up on his own and walking slowly between Amaia and Simon who escorted him.
‘I was so terrified…’ Amaia sobbed, ‘so upset to see you get hurt.’
‘I know’ White Feather said. ‘I could feel your emotions inside me. I knew how scared you were. I knew exactly how you felt.’
‘You just mean so much to me, losing you would be the worst thing that could happen to me now.’
‘Don’t you worry about me’ White Feather gleamed at her with confidence. ‘I’ll not leave your side.’
Amaia raised her head, looking at him properly now. ‘You're a fairy’ she said, ‘a magical being with abilities that are rare and wonderful. But today…I saw…that you are also just a man. You can age, die, feel pain…I thought for some time that for some reason you might be different…but you are just like me…more human than…. than…’ she broke off.
‘Magic doesn’t change who we are’ White Feather told her.
‘I know that now’ Amaia spoke to the floor, ‘you feel the same joys and fears as I do. You were scared earlier when you were trapped under that beam, but despite that, you chose to stay strong for me.’
‘I wasn’t scared’ White Feather said.
‘Yes, you were’ Amaia said, meeting his gaze again. ‘I could feel your fear inside of me, as you can feel *my* emotions…today I felt yours.’
White Feather blinked curiously, he opened his mouth to speak, but could think of nothing to say. So, he simply smiled.
‘I don’t know how I knew these feelings were coming from you’ Amaia went on, ‘but I just knew. They felt different, though…I can’t explain how.’
‘It feels the same for me too’ White Feather added. ‘I know which emotions I feel are mine, and which are yours, call it instinct if you will.’
Amaia smiled weakly at that. ‘I didn’t know I could feel your emotions’ she spoke softly.
‘The bond between fairies and their Weather Makers is always strong’ White Feather told her. ‘But it’s different for each individual.’
‘I'm just glad you're ok’ Amaia said.
‘Me too’ White Feather winked at her. ‘If anything happened to me, who would look after you?’
He ruffled her hair then, making it as messy as possible as Amaia tried to escape from him, squealing and giggling in protest. They stopped suddenly, as they noticed another figure had entered the room.
‘I'm sorry’ Simon voiced, taking off his hat and holding it awkwardly before him in both hands. ‘I didn’t mean to interrupt or bother either of you. I just wanted to make sure that you were both ok.’
‘I'm absolutely fine now’ White Feather sang happily to him, ‘thanks to you and your large muscles.’
Simon reddened slightly at that.

‘Thank you so much for helping him’ Amaia said, facing him as she rose to stand. ‘I'm so happy you came.’
‘Really?’ Simon asked hopefully. ‘You were?’
Amaia cocked her head curiously at him, but didn’t reply.
‘I…’ Simon began uncertainly. ‘You're…I mean…. Anya has asked me to sit with you….to join you all for the evening dinner, here…that she cooked. She just sent me up here to tell you it’s ready.’
‘Thank you, Simon,’ Amaia said. ‘We’ll both be down in a moment.’
‘Right’ he said. ‘I um…see you.’
He left quickly without another word.
‘He loves you; you know that?’ White Feather sighed into his palm as he leant on an elbow.
‘Can you feel his emotions too?’ Amaia asked.
‘I can only feel the emotions of other Weather Makers’ White Feather replied. ‘But I don’t need to feel his emotions to know how *he* feels. It’s obvious.’
‘Yeah’ Amaia mumbled, staring at the closed door. ‘It is.’
‘Hm?’ White Feather straightened. ‘If you know how he feels then why do you always ignore and shrug off his affections? He’s been madly in love with you for months.’
‘It’s because I'm afraid’ Amaia said. ‘I'm afraid of loving, in case I have to leave this wonderful place, and leave behind all that I have grown to care for so deeply.’
‘Maybe we can stay here forever’ White Feather suggested. ‘Maybe we don’t ever have to leave.’
‘I hope we can stay’ Amaia said absently. ‘I really do. Nothing would make me happier.’

That evening as they ate their meal together, Simon sat in silence before his food, though Amaia could not help but notice, his eyes constantly flicking towards her. She ignored him.
‘I promise you I'm absolutely fine’ White Feather repeated for about the fifth time, addressing Roy and Anya’s concerns for him. ‘All I need is a good meal and I will be as good as new, like it never happened.’
‘Well, we’re not short on good meals here’ Anya said to him. ‘I just worry for you that’s all.’
‘Thank you’ White Feather nodded to her. ‘I worry for you too.’
‘There’s something I've been meaning to ask you’ Roy said addressing Amaia, changing the subject suddenly. ‘You’ve done so much for us in the short time you’ve been here. Where did you learn such things?’
‘Oh, you know’ Amaia shrugged shyly, ‘books…’
‘That’s what Anya told me you said’ Roy chucked. ‘But it couldn’t have been *all* from books. It would have taken you years and years to learn all the things that you know. You're like the village healer now, so many come to you for help. And you can do so many other things. Did your mother teach you what you know?’
‘No’ Amaia said. ‘She didn’t.’
‘You’ve never really spoken much of your mother’ Anya mentioned to her, moving her attention away from White Feather. ‘What was she like? Was she a good person?’
‘Oh’ Amaia mumbled. ‘Yes. My mother loved me so much, she always told me so, every single day, and she used to hug me at every possible opportunity. I remember’ Amaia said

smiling at her plate, ‘how much it used to annoy me sometimes. She used to tickle me, and whisper in my ear. She used to call me, ‘*my precious treasure’*. All the time.’
Simon watched her silently as she spoke, eating his food slowly as he listened.
‘That sounds lovely’ Anya sighed. ‘Oh, I remember when Annabel was here. She used to always wake us up early in the mornings playing her violin. We spent ages saving up for that thing, ever since she saw a group of gypsies play as they travelled through our village, she’s wanted one.’
The table fell into an uneasy silence, as Roy and Anya stared at their plates sadly. Both thinking of their beloved daughter they had lost.
‘She may yet be found’ Amaia comforted.
Roy looked up from his plate smiling, though there were tears in his eyes. ‘As your father might yet be found too’ he said. ‘We’ve not lost hope.’
From across the table, Simon glanced tentatively towards Amaia, then away again.
‘More pork?’ White Feather offered to Anya.
‘No thank you dear’ Anya said. ‘I've had quite enough.’
Amaia sighed inwardly, thinking of the sadness Roy and Anya must feel to have lost their daughter so recently, and wishing there was something she could do to make things better.
Amaia had lost her mother, she knew she was dead. But Annabel was perhaps still alive, and if she was, then she was out there someone. Out in the world.
Amaia looked to the window. Beyond the sky was dark, and flecks of rain pattered against the glass.
Annabel may be out there somewhere Amaia thought, *as my father*.
She felt so helpless then.
What good are these powers I own if I cannot help the people I love?

Early the next day, Amaia leant against one of the fences, watching the sun coming up from its horizon.
‘This is a good place to be’ she said happily to White Feather who stood next to her.
‘That it is’ he nodded to her.
‘I'm glad to see you’ve fully recovered.’
‘Well, recovered enough anyway’ he said.
They stood side by side gazing across the farm and towards the sun, watching silently as it climbed higher into the sky.
Later that day, as Amaia went about her daily chores, she bumped into Simon again.
‘Hello’ he fumbled, as if he hadn’t expected to see her. ‘How are you?’
Amaia watched him for a moment, and then smiled.
‘I wish you didn’t care for me so much’ Amaia told him.
‘Why?’ Simon asked.
Amaia turned away from him.
‘I know your feelings for me’ she said. ‘I have done for a long time.’
‘I don’t want to bother you’ he said tentatively. ‘Please tell me if I'm bothering you.’
‘Tell me Simon’ Amaia spoke seriously facing him again, ‘have you ever lost anyone before?’
‘What?’

‘I’ve been here for nearly a year now’ she said, ‘and it’s beginning to feel like home.’
‘That’s good. Isn’t it?’
‘It is’ Amaia spoke slowly. ‘I think so anyway.’
‘You think…?’
‘I came here originally’ Amaia went on, ‘as you know, looking for my father. But…’ she trailed off.
‘You couldn’t find him.’
‘I don’t think that I ever will’ she said. ‘Not now.’
‘Does that make you sad?’
‘I don’t know’ Amaia confessed. ‘I guess it does. But…I haven’t seen him in so long……the passage of time…it does things to people, changes them.’
Amaia looked back at Simon.
‘I don’t know if things will ever go back to the way I wished they would be.’
Simon gave her a curious look.
‘You know Simon, how you’ve asked in the past…about my hair?’
‘Yes?’
‘Well…there’s a reason it’s the way it is.’
Amaia tugged lightly at a piece of her hair, glancing down at the light green colour.
‘One day’ Amaia began, ‘I fell into a bush. The colour of the leaves and the ivy turned my hair green.’
Simon frowned. ‘That makes no sense.’
‘Do you believe in magic?’ Amaia said to him, raising her head.
‘Magic?’ his eyes slid to the floor. ‘I don’t know what you mean.’
‘You know, things happening unnaturally, things that can be controlled.’
‘Like what?’
‘You mean you don’t believe in magic?’ Amaia asked him.
‘I'm saying’ Simon spoke slowly as he thought carefully; ‘I've never seen any before.’
Amaia lowered her eyes. ‘Would you like to?’
Simon watched her silently. Amaia looked back at him.
‘I'm not like other people you know.’
‘You shouldn’t say things like that.’
‘Listen to me’ Amaia interrupted. ‘I'm not like other people. I’m…different.’
Simon frowned at her unconvincingly. ‘Why are you telling me this?’
‘I…for a long time, hoped that my father might return to this village, I hoped for a long time…that I might see him again. But it’s been nearly a year, and there has been no whisper of him. I feel now that I have lost him forever. How will I find him in this big wide world? Where would I even begin? I would have no chance; I wouldn’t even know *where* to begin.’
Amaia took a deep breath, scratching her sweaty palms. ‘I am telling you all of this, because I have decided, that I want to stay here, permanently.’
‘Really?’ Simon asked, perking up. ‘Do you mean it? You really want to stay?’
‘Yes. I want to start a new life here.’
‘What changed your mind?’
‘I…’ Amaia shrugged. ‘I thought that my father….’ She shook her head. ‘I don’t want to keep living in the past. If I do that, then I will never have a future. White Feather is happy

here, I am happy here, and…well…' she shrugged again. 'I feel like I have gained another family.'
'I'm so happy' Simon cried jovially, grabbing both of Amaia's hands and holding them tightly in his own. Amaia smiled with him.
'Does that mean…. that we could…?'
'I have cared for you for a long time' Amaia told him, 'but I've been too afraid to show it.'
'Really? You have? I mean…why?'
'I've been scared of something bad happening' Amaia shrugged. 'I just…'
'You don't have to be scared of anything' Simon told her. 'I will look after you.'
He moved closer, lifting her chin up and leaning towards her.
'No' Amaia said sharply, stepping back suddenly. 'I have to tell you something.'
Simon visibly deflated, shoulders sagging. 'I thought you just said…'
'Listen to me; I wanted to tell you something.'
'Go on.'
'If you saw something that you never saw before, would you believe it to be true? Would you believe your eyes?'
'I suppose.'
'In that case…I was talking about magic…earlier…'
'Yes?' Simon shook his head. 'What has come over you today? Where is this all leading?'
'Listen' Amaia pressed. 'I was saying, how I'm not like other people, how I'm…different.'
'Yes?'
Amaia lowered her head. 'I can prove it to you. You said that you have never seen magic before, but if you saw something for yourself, that you would believe it. Isn't that right?'
'Yes.'
'In that case' Amaia went on, picking a flower growing from a bush nearby, 'I have something to show you.'
As she reached towards him with the flower, the thing began to frost over, its petals turned white.
Simon drew a sharp intake of breath, stepping back in shock.
'What is this?' he exclaimed.
'Magic' Amaia told him simply. 'You said you would believe.' She paused. 'So do you?'

That lunchtime passed in awkward silence between Simon and Amaia, Anya and Roy having invited Simon over as a way to thank him for helping them on the farm, as had become habit since the day White Feather had been injured by the falling shed. White Feather on the other hand was chatting animatedly to Anya and Roy. He acted as if he didn't notice anything had changed, Anya and Roy simply listened to him with silent smiles. They were both very fond of White Feather, and found him both pleasant and amusing.

The next day, Amaia was working in the field at the back of the home she shared with Roy and Anya. Kneeling in the soft dirt that had recently been ploughed, she worked on tying together a picket fence that had come loose.
'Here, don't forget this bit' White Feather offered helpfully, holding up a loose piece of string that Amaia hadn't tied yet.

He was in his smaller form now, hovering in the air and holding the piece of string that was at the moment, far longer than his body. His little glass-like wings were fluttering furiously with the extra weight of the string.
'Thank you White Feather' Amaia grinned. She took it from him, and continued to work. 'There' she said when she was finished. 'Another job well done.'
'I'll say' White Feather beamed. He landed on her shoulder, placing his hands on his hips and looking down at the now straight fence. 'It will last long enough until another stray cow decides to blunder through it again.'
'Yes, I know' Amaia sighed wearily, standing and walking away from the fence. 'Don't remind me. I've got so much to do today; the work is never ending. More fences to fix, cows to move from here to there, fruit to pick, horses to tend…'
'I know!' White Feather cried dramatically, falling back so that he was leaning against the side of her neck. 'So much toil will ruin my beautiful completion!'
'You've hardly done any work at all!' Amaia scolded.
'I carried the string!' White Feather protested.
'I've been meaning to ask you' Amaia frowned down at him. 'Why do you shrink yourself to do that? Isn't it harder that way?'
'Hey' White Feather said defensively. 'That string gets heavy after a while!'
From her shoulder, White Feather smirked. Coming to sit on his knees he grabbed Amaia's earlobe, using it to pull himself up. He blew into her ear teasingly. Amaia squealed in delight as White Feather grabbed onto her hair, so that he did not lose balance and topple over.
'Get off!' she giggled. 'That tickles!'
'It was meant to tickle' White Feather informed her.
He made himself grow even smaller still, slipping into her shirt and crawling under her armpit.
'*AHH*!' Amaia squeaked. '*Stop it please I'm begging you!*'
White Feather ceased his attack, growing larger again and sitting on her shoulder as before. He leant forward and kissed her on the cheek, leaving her shoulder and floating through the air before her. He grew to his regular size, tall as she was now; he turned to her, grinning slyly.
He tensed slightly; then smiled again. 'I see Simon coming' White Feather said. 'I think he wants to talk to you.'
Amaia felt a twinge of nervousness in her stomach.
'I wonder what he wants' Amaia mumbled. 'I hope everything's ok…. after yesterday…'
'I'm sure everything will be just fine' White Feather spoke happily; 'don't you worry.'
Seconds later, as White Feather had said, Simon came into view.
Amaia waited with trepidation as he slowed to a stop before her.
'Hi' he said to her.
'Hi' she replied. 'Are you…. ok…?'
Simon's eyes slid sideways towards the floor, before returning to her.
'I've just had a lot to think about.'
'Do you think of me differently, now that you know?' Amaia asked him. 'Now that you know I'm different from other people?'

‘I don’t know’ Simon spoke slowly. ‘You're still the same person after all. I just feel that now…I've learnt more about you.’
‘I've not told anyone else about what I really am. Not even Roy and Anya.’
‘You mean, I'm the only one who knows?’
‘Besides from White Feather’ Amaia said. ‘Yes.’
‘Then why did you tell me?’ Simon asked her. ‘And why haven’t you told anyone else?’
‘It’s a secret’ Amaia said. ‘But I've decided that it’s time to tell you at least.’
‘Why?’
‘Because I want to start a life here’ she told him.
‘You mean…you really want to stay here?’ Simon asked. ‘Forever?’
‘Yes.’
‘But what about your father?’
‘He could be anywhere’ Amaia said dismissively. ‘I doubt that I will ever find him now.’
‘Doesn’t that make you sad?’
‘It does’ Amaia said. ‘A little…’
She turned her back to him, willing her mind to move away from thoughts of her father.
‘I don’t want my mind to linger on what I cannot change’ Amaia told him. ‘It’s…too much to bear.’
‘Amaia…’
She felt Simon step closer from behind her. He wrapped his arms around her shoulders, holding her gently.
‘I want you to be happy’ he said to her. ‘I want to be here for you. I don’t want you to be sad. Not ever.’
‘I don’t want to feel regret’ Amaia said to him. ‘I don’t want to live in the past. I feel…. like I'm finally letting go, that I'm accepting everything I have here now.’
‘That’s good, isn’t it?’
‘It is.’
Simon stepped back as Amaia faced him; staring up at him with large eyes. For the longest time neither moved. White Feather, who had made himself invisible before Simon had approached, stood a few steps away, holding his breath and watching closely.
Simon moved closer again, lowering his head to hers.
Amaia turned her head away sharply.
‘I have work to do’ she said abruptly, not looking at him. ‘I mustn’t let myself fall behind.’
Simon stepped back, visibly disappointed. He let out a deep sigh. ‘I hope we can meet later today when you're free’ he said. ‘Goodbye.’
He walked away.
‘Well,’ White Feather said loudly once Simon had gone and was out of earshot, ‘that was a missed opportunity.’ He glanced sideways to Amaia. ‘Why did you hesitate?’ he asked her. ‘What's holding you back?’
Amaia didn’t answer, but stood, facing away from him.
‘Oh’ White Feather said. ‘I understand now.’
Amaia turned to him.
‘You’ve never been in love before, have you?’
‘Well…’ Amaia spoke slowly. ‘My options were…limited…over the years.’

‘I don’t doubt.’
White Feather strolled forwards towards the direction Simon had gone, placing his hands on his hips and staring out with a smug expression on his face.
‘This is going to be fun’ he said with a sly tone.
‘Don’t’ Amaia said. ‘Don’t make this difficult. And don’t tease me.’
‘I wouldn’t dare do any such thing’ White Feather waved back at her. ‘But that doesn’t mean to say I'm not allowed *some* fun. Right?’ he winked at her. ‘I must be off now.’
‘Where are you going?’
‘My dear girl’ White Feather smiled lovingly to Amaia. ‘I know we mean a lot to each other, but I can’t be with you *all* the time. As wonderful as that would be, you have a life of your own.’
Amaia narrowed her eyes with suspicion, frowning with displeasure.
‘Ta ta!’ he said to her. ‘And don’t you worry. I’ll never stray from your side for too long.’
His wings curled outwards, blending into sight from thin air. The delicate glass-like wings began to quiver. His feet left the ground, and he flew upwards, invisible to all except Amaia.
It was impossible for a fairy to make themselves invisible to any Weather Maker, even if they wanted to. Amaia felt some comfort in the fact that she could see him all the time. He was like a life-line to her. A safety blanket. And without him, the world would seem a much darker and more dangerous place.
No matter what had happened, Amaia felt better that White Feather was by her side.

Elsewhere, White Feather fluttered over the heads of the people and houses of the village below him. From where he flew, he had the best view of what he wanted to see. It was only a short time later when he found what he was looking for. White Feather landed on the roof of one of the thatched homes, standing sideways on the slope of the roof so as not to topple off. He crouched low, not that it mattered anyway, as he was still invisible. And there he saw him.
‘Simon’ White Feather gleamed slyly watching him as he worked. ‘Let the games begin.’

Over the next few days, White Feather spent most of his time teasing both Amaia and Simon, drawing them closer together. Strange ‘coincidences’ began to happen; Amaia’s possessions somehow began to turn up on Simon’s person. Simon’s possessions somehow began to turn up on Amaia’s person. The two seemed to somehow always run into each other. Amaia injured herself on some machinery one day, and Simon just happened to be there.
He took her inside, to wash the blood away, and to bandage up the wound. Afterwards, Amaia left to continue work. Simon a short time after went to go find her again, having found her comb, a beautiful glass piece shaped like a flower that was in his pocket. It had been a gift from Roy and Anya. They didn’t know her birthday, so they decided randomly one day that that day was the day. The comb was very precious to her.
‘It’s strange how we keep running into each other like this’ Simon told her, handing the comb back.
‘Thank you’ Amaia said graciously, taking it from him. ‘I was wondering where I’d put that.’
She pocketed it, smiling up at him.

‘Since we’re here’ Simon began. ‘Do you…I mean…do you have…to do any work at the moment. I mean…are you free…with…spare time…?’
Amaia giggled at his awkwardness, spotting suddenly a figure waving to her from a short distance away, over Simon’s shoulder.
White Feather Amaia glowered seeing him. *You sly dog you.*
‘I would love to’ Amaia said to Simon. ‘There is nothing that can’t wait until later.
‘Are you sure?’ Simon asked her, livening up.
‘Of course,’ Amaia grinned to him. ‘I've got time to spare.’
‘Oh good’ Simon breathed a sigh of relief. ‘Uh…oh gods…’ He scratched the back of his head uncomfortably. ‘If we were in the city, I’d take you out for a drink or something. Or maybe visit some exciting attraction.’
‘We don’t have to spend money to enjoy ourselves’ Amaia said to him, taking his arm. ‘We could have fun, right here.’
‘We could?’
Amaia smirked at him in amusement, letting go of him. ‘How many other women have you been with?’
‘What?’ Simon spluttered, waving his arms about. ‘I…I mean…why would you ask me something like that?’
‘I was just wondering’ Amaia said simply, holding her hands before her. ‘I've never been with anyone before.’
Simon lowered his arms that he had been seconds earlier waving around as if about to take off. Now he watched Amaia with a relaxed demeanour.
‘I know it sounds weird’ Amaia went on looking away. ‘But…I've never been in a relationship before. I've never been…in love with someone. I don’t know how it feels.’
‘It feels good’ Simon told her.
‘I'm sure it does’ Amaia said glancing back. ‘Have you been in love before?’
‘Yes’, he nodded.
‘What happened?’
Now Simon looked away. ‘Sometimes…. people change’ he answered simply. ‘She was a childhood sweetheart…. but…. the more she grew, the more she wanted something else.’
‘She wasn’t happy here?’
‘No. It was something I wished I could have changed…but…. some people…. are just the way they are.’
‘You can’t change people’ Amaia said. ‘It would be wrong to try.’
‘That’s why I didn’t’ Simon faced her again. ‘I figured…. that it would work…if it was right. If it didn’t work…. then it wasn’t meant to be.’
‘So…’ Amaia began. ‘What happened to her?’
‘She moved to the city’ Simon replied.
‘Where?’
‘I don’t know. I haven’t seen her in ages.’
‘And you haven’t tried looking for her?’
‘No.’ Simon lowered his eyes. ‘She became a different person to the one I knew growing up.’
‘Was it hard to let go?’

‘It was. It took me years to stop regretting, years to stop doubting myself. But I got over it in the end.’
‘How?’
‘I met you.’
Their eyes met for an instant, before Amaia turned away, blushing.
‘Oh gods’ she said. ‘I've never done this before.’
‘Well,’ he shrugged. ‘There’s always a first time for everything. I just…. hope I'm worthy of your affection.’
Amaia looked back at him. ‘You shouldn’t put yourself down like that.’
He shrugged at her again. ‘I don’t mean to…I just…. you know.’
Amaia smiled at him.
‘Why don’t we talk somewhere more private?’ he suggested.
Amaia felt a twinge in her heart at this, her stomach flipping over.
‘Alright’ she said.
‘Would you like to hold my hand?’ Simon offered.
‘Um…’ Amaia drew back.
‘It’s alright’ Simon laughed as he lowered his hand again. ‘Just follow me if you like.’
Amaia walked in Simon’s footsteps, glancing back at White Feather who stood on the other side of the field. He hadn’t moved since she last saw him, and was now waving jovially to her and shaking his hands in the air in a celebratory fashion. Amaia scowled at him, turning her back on him and his teasing.
She trailed after Simon. The two left the village, walking into the open plains and becoming dots in the distance.

‘You know what would be a great idea?’ Simon suggested after a time of walking alone together. ‘We should leave the village for a day. And ride away on horses.’
‘You mean to get away?’ Amaia asked. ‘Just the two of us?’
‘We work so hard every day’ he sighed. ‘I just wish…I don’t know…’ he shook his head. ‘There’s always so much work to do…always. It leaves little time for anything else.’
‘Do you wish to move to the city as well then?’ Amaia questioned.
‘No’ Simon turned to the side, his hair blowing back from his face. There was a firm breeze upon the unsheltered plains. ‘Not the city’ he went on. ‘Just somewhere different.’

The next day, the two left their homes early in the morning to meet each other. They each took a horse, and rode away together across the plains. Roy and Anya woke later that day, and were worried when Amaia did not come for breakfast. They went to the room she shared with White Feather, only to find him sitting on the bed as if waiting for them.
When they entered, he simply smiled at them.

Over the next few days, Simon and Amaia would meet regularly and get to know each other, in a way they hadn't done so before.
One evening, the two had stole away. They rode far from the village that had fallen silent in the early night, lit now only by lanterns dotted here and there. The village sat there, like a beast about to slumber.
Two lovers rode far across the plains, hidden deep within the night. They slipped into the even darker world beneath the trees in a forest nearby, and made love in a clearing under the stars.

Chapter Fifty-Nine
Dreams of a Better Life

'I never told you this before' he began sheepishly, talking to Amaia as they sat in the clearing of the forest. 'But what I said the other day…. about wanting to go somewhere different…and being tired of work all the time…when he were walking on the open plains…well…'
'What?'
'I…what I really meant was…. oh, it's just a silly fantasy…. I couldn't possibly have mentioned it back then. I would have frightened you off.'
'Tell me' Amaia scolded, slapping him lightly. 'Don't be shy. And don't tease me either.'
'I was just thinking' Simon relented. 'Wouldn't it be great if we could get away and start a new life together? Somewhere new. Just the two of us.'
'That would be wonderful!' Amaia beamed, holding her hands over her heart. 'Do you really mean it?'
'I do' Simon nodded. 'I've never felt this way about anyone before…not since…well…that didn't work. But I feel confident about us now.'
'You do?'
'Yes' Simon gave a firm nod. 'I do.'
'Enough to ask me for us to start a new life together?'
'Yes', he said gently taking her hand. 'You're like a shining light to me Amaia. You make me feel so happy when I'm sad…and all the time really…oh…. I'm not that good at words.'
'It's alright' Amaia giggled, leaning into him. 'I understand what you're trying to say.'
'It's just you make me feel so happy' Simon went on. 'Happier than I can ever remember feeling. When I'm not with you I think of you, when I'm with you….my heart is overflowing.'
'Stop' Amaia chuckled lightly, placing her fingertips over his lips. 'I understand what you mean. You don't have to…'
'I know' Simon interrupted. 'I just can't help myself. I'm so happy you feel the same way. I'm just….so excited now.'
'Good' Amaia smiled, poking his nose. 'I'm excited too. But we had better leave here soon, or else the others will begin to worry about us.'

‘They won’t worry’ Simon shrugged her off. ‘They’ve got the picture by now, I'm sure. They know we are…you know…’
‘Even so’ Amaia said rising to her feet. ‘If we're gone for too long, they might send out a search party.’
‘They won’t’ Simon fumbled, rising to join Amaia. ‘White Feather I'm sure would ease any worries they might have.’
‘Of that I do not doubt. But still…Roy and Anya might get concerned if we don’t return soon.’
‘Alright’ Simon sighed in exasperation. ‘We’ll go back.’
‘Good’ she said satisfied, leaning forwards and giving him a quick kiss. ‘I can’t be lounging around here all day, as tempting as that is. There’s lots to do today’ she sighed, throwing the dress over her head and straightening her clothes.
She mounted her horse, blowing Simon a kiss, before pulling the reins around and sending the beast into a canter. She travelled out of the forest, back across the plains and towards the village, leaving Simon to follow after her sometime later.

Days later, when Amaia had finished her work, she went to find Simon, waving at him as she approached.
He waved awkwardly back at her, stepping forwards onto a rake and causing it to smack him in the face. White Feather sitting on Amaia’s shoulder laughed hysterically at this, falling silently quickly as Amaia glared at him.
‘Did you put that there?’ she asked him seriously, speaking quietly so that only he could hear her.
‘No’ White Feather said in a tone that clearly indicated that he was lying.
Simon rubbed his face where the rake had hit him, grinning at Amaia sheepishly as White Feather, invisible to him, flew off Amaia’s shoulder and away.
‘Are you ok?’ Amaia asked him.
‘Y-yes’ Simon fumbled awkwardly. ‘I'm fine. Really. How clumsy of me.’
‘Listen, I wanted to just ask you something.’
‘Come over here.’ Simon led her away. ‘We can talk where it’s quieter.’
‘I was just wondering’ Amaia began when they were alone, ‘when did you want to…. start these plans?’
‘What plans?’
‘Of getting away and starting a new life together, remember? Just the two of us.’
‘Oh’ Simon fumbled.
‘Honestly’ Amaia sighed dramatically rolling her eyes. ‘You can be so dippy sometimes.’
He smirked at her, grabbing Amaia suddenly and tickling her. She tried in vain to escape from him.
‘No! Help! Let me go AHHH*HHHH*!
‘You make the most dreadful noises when I tickle you’ Simon spoke loudly over her screaming and cackling.
‘Please no more I can’t take it!’ Amaia sucked in a lungful of air, drawing as deep a breath as she could in order to express the fact that she could take no more.
‘*AAAAAHHHHHHHHHH!’*

This might have alarmed some people to hear a sudden scream and such commotion and noise come out of a young lady's mouth. But by now the people of the village knew the couple, and had become familiar with their banter. They only watched in amusement as they passed by, feeling the happiness radiating from the couple, and catching some themselves. They would laugh and shake their head, remembering when they themselves acted in such a way when they were younger and their love new.

White Feather watched with a wide smile, sitting silently above them on the edge of one of the rooftops. He had made less of a presence now, the closer Amaia and Simon became. But he was always there watching over Amaia, but this time from a distance, feeling her happiness inside him.

From their home, Roy and Anya would watch also, feeling the same. They would look to one another, grasping the others hand, squeezing tightly. And they would utter the words *I love you* to one another. Anya and Roy were childhood sweethearts, and they had lived and stuck together through thick and thin. Seeing Amaia and Simon so happy together, made them feel young again, their love rekindled stronger.

Simon grabbed Amaia around the legs, lifting her up so that she sat on his shoulder. She threw her arms into the air, squealing in delight.

'I can see the whole world from up here!'

'Stay still' Simon huffed. 'Or else I'll drop you.'

'You wouldn't dare.'

Amaia screamed as Simon tossed her from his shoulder, catching her in his arms before she fell.

'Oh you' she scowled.

'Do that again' he grinned slyly. 'You look so cute when you're angry.'

She kissed him passionately, allowing herself to be placed back on the floor.

'It's hard to part' Amaia said. 'But you must let me go. I've got work to do. I have to milk the cows and feed the goats…'

'Alright' he relented, letting go of her. 'We'll meet up later, won't we?'

'Of course we will' she smiled, holding him by the front of his shirt and standing on her tip toes to reach him for a kiss.

The next day, Amaia was tending to one of the horses. Brushing him and cleaning his shoes after many hours of work.

'Amaia!' came a loud voice all of a sudden. 'Amaia!'

She tensed suddenly, straightening up. 'What is it?' she said to the elderly man scurrying up to her. 'What's wrong?'

'My daughter's fallen from her horse!' he explained hastily. 'She's hurt real bad. Injured her head…maybe broken bones…please come quick.'

Amaia threw the brushes down, rushing to meet the old man.

'Where is she?' Amaia demanded.

'By the well' the old man puffed, unable to keep up with Amaia's long-legged pace. 'I told her to wait there while I find you.' He clutched the stitch at his side as he spoke. 'The horse is lost. Ran off somewhere. Something must have spooked it. When I found her, I went to get you right away…'

‘I’ll go on ahead’ Amaia said hurriedly to the old man, before jogging onwards and out of his view.
She ran for several seconds, through the narrow roads between the homes, weaving by the quickest route to the well. By now, she knew this village like the back of her hand, and knew this was the quickest way. She passed a home that was near the field where Roy and Anya were working that day. But she paid no heed to anything else, thinking only of reaching the well as quickly as possible. The poor girl could be seriously hurt.
And then she heard a scream of terror.
Her heart froze. She wheeled around, eyes wide, recognising the voice.
‘Anya…?’
In her mind she completely forgot her task in reaching the well, instead without a second thought she ran to the field where the sound had come from. The field where Anya and Roy were working.
Amaia rounded the corner of one of the houses, seeing a strange sight indeed. Soldiers of all things were here, armed and armoured; one of them had grabbed Anya and was shaking her roughly, demanding something of her. There was a red mark on her cheek where she had been struck. Now she was screaming and shaking her head, hysterical. Roy nearby was trying to get to her, but was held back by another soldier who was interrogating him also. Roy was shaking his head angrily at the soldier that pushed him back, baring teeth and pointing furiously, though Amaia couldn’t hear clearly what they were saying over the commotion.
She ran forwards. ‘Stop’ she cried, coming to a halt several steps away from them. ‘Leave them alone!’
All of them instantly froze, staring at her in shock. And then one of the soldiers spoke to another, one of several that were present.
‘This is her?’ he said in a flat tone.
‘A green haired young woman? Lucky for us she’s easy to spot. Yes, it’s her.’
The soldier nearest made a lunge for her.
‘No!’ Amaia jumped back, but was quickly caught. Despite the armour, the soldier was surprisingly quick on his feet. ‘Let me go!’ she snarled.
‘Leave her alone!’ Anya screeched, starting forwards towards Amaia and the soldier to intervene.
Another soldier blocked her path, backhanding her hard and sending her sprawling. Roy was by her side in an instant, shielding his wife from further blows from the soldier who towered over them both. He did not try to fight back, fearing to anger the soldier further, but cast his body over his wife’s, staring helplessly up at him and showing his hands in submission, begging. The soldier quickly backed down, turning away from him to face Amaia, who was struggling in vain against the soldier who held her firmly.
‘White Feather!’ she screamed. ‘Help me!’
Amaia felt herself being dragged backwards, thrashing furiously against the hands that held her. She screamed, throwing her head back. Frost began to cover the ground, growing from her feet outwards. The man who held her winced in shock at the spectacle, but still did not release his vice-like grip, not even when the frost began to creep up his arms.
A distance away, White Feather landed on the roof of one of the houses, he watched silently with wide eyes as Amaia was dragged towards a carriage that waited nearby.

On the ground, the wind began to pick up, growing stronger as it blew violently in circles around Amaia. The earth began to crack at her feet. Amaia grimaced, squeezing her eyes tight shut as she concentrated on using her magic in any way she could. She forced herself to think clearer, forced herself to channel her magic, instead of flailing it around. She turned it on the man behind her, aiming for his heart, and beginning to freeze it. The man swiftly let her go, but before she could complete her task, she was struck hard over the back of the head, and knocked out cold.

She came around just as she was being lifted into the carriage. Her arms were tied behind her back, and the last thing she saw before the door to the carriage closed on her, sealing her in, was Simon, staring at her in shock a short distance away, pale as a ghost.
And then the door was slammed shut.

Chapter Sixty
A Guardian's Sacrifice

Lying on her side on the floor inside the carriage, Amaia struggled helplessly against the ropes that bound her arms behind her back, sobbing into the carpet. The carriage jolted as it was pulled forwards along the road, and she felt the vibrations through the carriage floor as the horses carried her onwards to places unknown.
Helpless, alone and terrified, Amaia lay there and waited for her fate. She lay there and cried. For the grief she had caused, for the pain she had suffered. When she had thought she was just picking up the beginnings of a normal life, it had all once again been ripped from her.
And now she cried, because everything felt hopeless again.
But she was not alone as she first thought. Her guardian angel was with her, her fairy White Feather. He sat atop the carriage as it trundled along, invisible to the soldiers mounted on stallions that rode around the carriage, never breaking formation as they guarded it.
'I'm here' White Feather whispered, stroking the roof of the carriage below him. 'Don't be afraid. I'm here with you.'

The horses were not allowed rest, and the carriage only stopped hours later, coming to an unknown place.
The door to the carriage was opened and a soldier moved towards her. Amaia was pulled roughly from the carriage and blindfolded. She stumbled as she was shoved forwards, through her blindfold she could see nothing, but she noticed the environment darken around her considerably as she was led onwards, what little light that penetrated through the cloth now faded.
She was in a dark place now. Somewhere inside.
Amaia was led down what must have been a corridor, the noise from the heavy footsteps of herself and the soldiers around her echoed back at them. She heard the screech of a door open, and she was shoved forwards again. The rope around her arms was removed, her blindfold was whipped off and she found herself in a tiny bare room with no window. Amaia

turned and stared fearfully at the soldier that stood before her, her eyes red, skin blotchy and tears streaking her face. She drew deep breaths as he stared back at her, she wondered what he would do, and if he would speak to her. He didn't.
The soldier stepped back silently, closing the door after him. Amaia heard the sound of a key turning in the lock, the lock clicking in place, and the key being withdrawn again.
The noise was final.
The footsteps of those that had brought her here receded into silence and Amaia dared to approach the door. There was a tiny barred window set in the door at head-height. She peered through it tentatively, but saw nothing beyond but an empty and gloomy corridor, dimly lit by burning torches.
It was very dark in the room, it smelt filthy, and she dared not approach the corners for fear of what might be there. She examined her meagre surroundings, squinting and blinking in the shadows. She saw with a sinking heart, that were was not even a bed.

Amaia stood in the centre of the room, shoulders hunched and holding herself. Her body sagged as he knees weakened. She allowed herself to fall slowly to the floor, head hung and crying into her knee.
'Simon…' she sobbed, his pale face and expression of disbelief burned into her memory. 'I'm sorry...'
'Amaia.'
Amaia lifted her head slowly, blinking tears from her eyes and gazing blearily about her in confusion. Had she heard a voice? Or was it in her mind?
'Amaia' came the voice again.
Amaia felt a tug at her ear. She looked down, seeing the tiny form of White Feather standing on her shoulder.
'White Feather' she hissed under her breath. 'I'm so glad…'
'What? You couldn't possibly think that I would leave you?' he hugged her neck. 'Never' he said. 'Never.'
She opened her hands out for him, and he floated through the air to land on her open palms.
'Oh White Feather' she sighed miserably to him. 'What I am to do?'
'I don't know' White Feather admitted, 'but don't worry' he said quickly to her. 'I will protect you.'
'Where am I? What is this place I've been brought to?'
White Feather hesitated. 'You are safe here for the meantime at least' he told her.
'What was that noise?' Amaia gasped suddenly.
Her voice trembled as she spoke. The sound they both heard was a low moan, rumbling through the walls and floor of the cell. Amaia could feel the sound vibrating in her very chest. It sounded as if it had come from a great beast of colossal size.
'There is a creature' White Feather explained, 'somewhere in this place, imprisoned like you are. It's in one of the cells' he whispered, 'a long way down the corridor. This place is like a maze.'
'Cells?' Amaia repeated. 'You mean there's more than this one? Is this a prison of some sort? Who else is kept here?'
'Amaia' White Feather sighed avoiding her eyes. 'Maybe it's best you do not ask.'

Amaia drew her hands apart, White Feather took flight hovering before her to avoid falling.
'I wish I never had these powers!' Amaia cried in despair turning away from him, still resting on her knees. 'They have ruined my life and brought me nothing but misfortune and suffering!'
'You mustn't speak like that' White Feather told her firmly. 'Your powers are a rare gift.'
'No' Amaia shook her head, tears rolling down her cheeks again. She hugged her knees, staring miserably into the darkness. Already her body was becoming numb from sitting on such an uncomfortable surface. 'My father never cared for me, never loved me. I will never find him and he will never find me…not here. And Roy and Anya…and Simon…'
'No' White Feather said firmly to her, grasping her shoulder. He had gained his full size again. 'I placed a spell upon your father. He is looking for you still, at this very moment.'
'After all these years?' Amaia asked him unconvinced. 'He's surely forgotten all about me.'
'Have you forgotten all the good moments you shared together, with your mother *and* father? You were a happy family. He was a good father to you, a good man...'
'Once…' Amaia replied meekly, 'but things changed.'
'Amaia' White Feather spoke sternly, coming around to kneel before her, grabbing her by both shoulders and holding her tightly. 'He *will* find you again.' There were tears in his eyes as he spoke to her. The expression on his face was set in stone as he stared wide-eyed at her. A single tear ran down his cheek, and then another. '*Trust me*' White Feather said to her beginning to tremble, '*trust me*; I will see you two united, even if it means my death.'
'White Feather…'
'I am your guardian' White Feather told her. 'I exist only to protect *you*, and others like you in need. I am here for you, and I always will be. No matter what.' His nails dug into her shoulders then. '*No matter what*…'
Her face screwed up, overflowing inside with emotions of sadness and grief and despair. White Feather leant forward, embracing her tightly, feeling her sorrow too.
Amaia's arms slowly came up to hold him back.
'I love you White Feather…' she whispered, resting her head against his shoulder. 'I'm glad you're here with me. Meeting you is the best thing that's ever happened to me……thank you.'
White Feather leant back from her, caressing her cheek tenderly, tears streaming down his own cheeks as he smiled sadly at her. He held her head gently, brushing her tears away and kissing her forehead.
He moved to sit beside her, lifting an arm around her shoulders as she did the same. The two held each other, side by side close to one another.
'I don't know what's going to happen' White Feather said to her, 'but always…I will protect you if I can. I will protect you, until your father finds you, then *he* can protect you, as he did when you were young, when life was good.'
A gentle warmth grew from White Feather's chest, the same warmth that had kept Amaia sleeping peacefully in the cold nights under the stars when they had travelled, all that time ago when they were looking for Farrell and Arlen.
White Feather placed a spell upon Amaia. Amaia's eyelids drooped and her body went limp. White Feather eased her down as she fell into a peaceful and deep sleep, laying her on her

back, with her head resting on his lap. He leant over her, resting his forehead against hers, his tears falling onto her cheeks as he held her head in his hands.
'I love you Amaia' he whispered. 'I love you…'

Days passed, and Amaia stayed where she was, in her tiny cell with White Feather. White Feather would leave her side from time to time. She didn't know where he would go, but he would bring her back food, good food, not the slop that was pushed under her door twice a day. Amaia would accept the food that White Feather brought her with gratitude. Thanks to him, Amaia was able to stave off the hunger and remain healthy, day after day.
Amaia and White Feather would sit for hours on end in complete silence, simply waiting.
'Where is the key?' Amaia asked him at one point.
'It's in the coat pocket of one of the guards' White Feather replied without looking up.
'Then why don't you steal it?'
'I can't. Your cell is too far away from the entrance. There are too many guards, and that creature…stands between you and the outside world…I'm sorry…' he buried his face in his arms, the action was as if he were trying to hide from her, as if he felt guilty, ashamed, for not being able to do more.

At last days later, someone came for her. There were heavy footsteps coming from down the corridor, heading towards her cell. Amaia, expecting the flap under the door to open and food to be pushed through, ignored the sound. But instead, the sound of a key being turned in the lock was heard. White Feather instantly made himself invisible as the door was swung open. Amaia looked up fearfully at the soldier standing in the doorway, towering over her fully armoured; to her he seemed like a titan.
He strode towards her. Amaia flinched as the soldier grabbed her roughly by her arm, pulling her to her feet. Outside in the corridor waited several more soldiers. Amaia was led down the passage, this time without a blindfold. She felt a mounting trepidation in her heart as they went. But her fear eased slightly as she felt a presence by her side, a light touch on her shoulder. White Feather was standing there, invisible to all but her; he tugged at her ear to keep himself balanced as Amaia was marched forwards by the guards, his little hand holding tightly onto her earlobe. Amaia felt comfort at having him by her side.
Amaia was taken through the dark and dank corridors and to a stairs that led to a place above them. Through the door at the top of the stairs, Amaia went, squinting and shielding her eyes from a sudden dazzling light that cast itself upon her and the soldiers around. Her eyes adjusted to the bright surroundings as she was shoved forwards by one of the soldiers, after a few seconds, Amaia was able to see clearly all that was around her. The room she found herself in was large and had been built with great fortune and beauty. It reminded her a little of the halls she had spent many years of her life in, back in a time she had been waited on hand and foot by a host of servants, but never spoken to, never acknowledged, and always ignored. She had completely forgotten about her life in that place, that place she had spent twelve years. But on seeing these rooms, the memories suddenly flooded back to her.

Her confusion only mounted as she was led onwards, and she wondered in silence who could have taken her. Whoever it was that had imprisoned her, it must be a person of vast wealth, equal to, no, more so than the man who had imprisoned her before.
More so than the prince Tristan, the man who claimed to be her father.
More wealth than a prince? Amaia thought, eyes darting all around her, taking in every detail of the polished marble floors, the beautiful stained-glass windows, the great chandlers above their heads, the wide stairs with blood-red carpets. *Only a king* she realised with shock. *Oh gods…what's going to happen to me?*
She was led through many rooms and into a great hall through a set of tall double doors. The soldiers that escorted her turned and left her suddenly, closing the doors behind them. White Feather instantly flew off Amaia's shoulders, regaining his usual size, though remaining invisible. He snarled instantly at the sight of a man standing before them, facing them, a man who had been waiting for them inside the hall.
White Feather glared at him, with a look that Amaia had never seen before. It was one of pure hatred, anger and loathing.
'Do you know him?' Amaia whispered quietly to White Feather.
'Yes', White Feather hissed back. 'He is the one who killed the last Weather Maker I served.'
Amaia stared back at the king wide-eyed now. She was terrified.
'There is no need to speak secretly' the king said. 'I can see you. Both of you.'
Amaia drew a gasp of fear, White Feather became frozen.
'I can see you' the king repeated, staring straight at White Feather. 'You are young, lean, and have black hair.'
White Feather instantly paled.
'How is it' he spoke very slowly, '…that you can see me?'
The king narrowed his eyes.
'How do you have this ability?!' White Feather spoke louder now. 'I should be invisible to you, like I was the last time I was before you.'
'A figure in a bird-mask gave me these abilities' the king replied sombrely. 'But it only works in this room.'
'What?' White Feather snapped. 'That makes no sense!'
'There is so much you do not know' the king said gliding away from him.
White Feather lowered his head, never taking his eyes off the king. 'And you' he said to him, 'do not know as much as you wish.'
'That is why, you are here to help me' the king smiled with cruelty. 'Girl' he said to Amaia. 'Come with me.'
White Feather's heart began to sink into despair as the king led Amaia to the end of the hall, and towards the woman he had become familiar with. The queen, forever sleeping. White Feather stuck close to Amaia as she followed the king, always just one step behind her.
'This is my wife the queen' the king spoke in a monotone. 'She wasn't my first wife, but she was my first love.' He turned to face Amaia. 'I want you to help her' he said.
Amaia stared down at the woman. Her cheeks were light in colour; her blonde hair was unnaturally bright and grew very long, like her nails. But her nails and hair were clean and washed and had been kept in order. The white dress she wore was clean and fresh. This body was cared for.

‘Help her?’ Amaia spoke weakly, as she gazed into the face of the sleeping queen. ‘But how? What’s wrong with her?’
‘She has been sleeping for a very long time. I want you to wake her up.’
Amaia glanced at the king. ‘I wouldn’t know how.’
‘If you don’t make her better, I will make you suffer until you do.’
‘But…I can’t’ Amaia shook her head backing away, starting to panic now. Her voice breaking as she spoke. ‘I have no idea what's wrong with her, how would I?’
‘Because you are a Weather Maker like her’ the king answered simply. ‘Help her’ he said. ‘Or die.’
Amaia’s heart grew cold.
The king made the briefest indication to a figure that stood at the edge of the hall, a figure that had stood utterly still until now, one that Amaia had not noticed before. He was a soldier of some kind.
He grabbed Amaia by the shoulders, hurting her as he pulled her away from the queen and back towards the centre of the hall, drawing a knife as he did so.
‘Stop!’ White Feather cried.
‘If you speak again, I will put you in chains’ the king told him.
‘Coward!’ White Feather spat. ‘To hurt innocent women like this, and force others to do your dirty work? You're a dam coward!’
The quiet soldier hesitated, glancing towards the king for instruction.
The king did not break his attention from White Feather, but continued to watch him coolly.
‘Amaia is weak’ White Feather told him. ‘She is young. I am far older than her. More powerful. At least have the courage to do it yourself.’
White Feather stood rigid as he spoke these words, staring back at the king in defiance, waiting to see what he would do.
‘You're right’ the king said at length. ‘It’s not the girl I should pay my attentions to. It’s you.’
He grabbed the knife from the soldier, and in a few strides was upon White Feather. He swung his fist, knocking the fairy onto his back. The king sat on his chest, using his knees to pin down the fairy’s arms, he held White Feather’s throat with one hand, the other he raised the knife. White Feather was too weak to fight back or even attempt to free himself.
‘Coward, am I?’ the king said in a deadly whisper.
The king brought the knife closer to White Feather’s face, forcing the point through his left eye.
White Feather began to scream.

Amaia watched silently the whole process, until she was dragged away sometime later, and put back in her cell.
She was unresponsive when food was brought to her, and didn’t respond to the voice of the man who had pushed her tray through the gap beneath the door. She stayed where she was in the centre of the room on the cold hard floor, shaking and sweating uncontrollably.

Amaia sat in her prison, feeling alone and miserable, and desperately worrying for White Feather, who had remained in the hall when she was taken away.
How she hated being parted from him so forcefully.
Amaia gave a steady sigh, feeling ever more depressed and wondering what had happened in her life to make everything go so wrong.
'I just wanted a normal life' she sobbed, burying her face in her arms as she held her knees against her chest. 'White Feather is wrong……my powers are a curse…'
She clamped a hand over her mouth.
'Oh gods…' she breathed. 'I don't even know if he's still alive. Would it be worse if he was?' Tears streamed down her cheeks. 'What could they be doing to him now…if he is still….?'
That night, she dreamed.

Amaia stepped forward, towards the shadowy figure. She squinted, but could not make out who it was.
And then the figure moved towards her.
Amaia gasped.
'Mother?!'
Ramana smiled widely. She was exactly as Amaia remembered her in her childhood. Beautiful and full of life, with long black hair cascading down her back.
'Oh gods…' Amaia whispered. 'Is this real? Please, please let it really be you.'
'I am as I stand before you' Ramana answered. 'As you see.'
'So…you really did die that day?'
Ramana bowed her head. 'Yes…'
Amaia bowed her head too, the muscles around her eyes twitching as the tears began to rise.
'I had hoped…longed……. with all my heart……. that I would see you again…' Amaia raised her head. 'I was looking forward to returning to a family. But without you…and father being the way he is.'
'Your father was not a perfect husband' Ramana said. 'He was not a perfect man……but he had a good heart, and he loved the both of us very much.'
'I miss you so much…' Amaia sobbed, tears spilling down her cheeks. You were everything I had…'
'Oh Amaia…' Ramana sighed, tilting her head sadly at her. 'I'm sorry…'
'Mama…'
Ramana opened her arms and Amaia rushed up to her, embracing her tightly, as if scared she would be taken away again. Ramana held her calmly back, hand resting on Amaia's head.
'Amaia…' she said. 'My precious treasure.'
'I love you…' Amaia whined. 'I love you so much……I never want to be away from you again! You were the best thing in the world to me.'
'You have your father' Ramana answered.
'But he…'
'I know' Ramana whispered. 'I know…'
'I couldn't bear to lose you again…it would destroy me…...I could never……. could never….' Amaia held her tighter. 'Mama……I'm sorry….'

‘Amaia’ Ramana smiled, unable to keep back her own tears. ‘You mean more to me than life itself. My own daughter…. I have missed you so terribly…’
‘I can’t do this anymore’ Amaia sobbed into her mother’s shoulder. ‘I can’t…I would rather die…’
‘Don’t say that.’
‘I mean it’ Amaia said, still not letting go of her mother. ‘You were the best mother in the world…. you were everything I had….’
‘Amaia’ Ramana said more firmly now. ‘You have to find your father.’
‘I can’t, I don’t know where he is! But I don’t care! I just want to stay here with you.’
‘Life goes on Amaia’ Ramana said slipping from her grasp. ‘Life goes on for everyone. It always has.’
‘No!’ Amaia cried as her arms slipped through thin air. ‘Please don’t leave! Please don’t leave me! I need you!’
‘You have to carry on’ Ramana said fading away. ‘You have to find him.’
‘I love you!’ Amaia called to the fading shadow. ‘I can’t do this without you!’
‘I will be here’ Ramana told her. ‘I will always be watching.’
‘MOTHER!’

She was woken abruptly from her dreams by the sound of a key turning in the lock. But she felt no fear; she felt nothing at all, as the dream in her mind began to slip from memory.
She had lost White Feather; both her parents were long gone, Roy and Anya and Simon too……nothing else mattered to her now.
She was not afraid.
The door opened and Amaia sat up, seeing a man standing there. He was unlike the other men she had previously seen. He didn’t wear armour; he didn’t even look like a soldier.
Amaia blinked at him, tilting her head towards him. The man spoke.
‘Amaia…’
‘You know my name?’ she mumbled.
‘You have to come with me’ the man said, stepping into the cell and kneeling before her.
‘Why?’
‘I'm going to get you out of here, take you somewhere safe.’
Hope slowly kindled in her heart as the information sunk in.
‘Why would you help me?’
‘I'm your father’ Tristan said hastily to her.
‘No’ Amaia shook her head. ‘You look different to the man who stood next to my mother in that painting in my home.’
‘She is not your mother’ Tristan spoke harshly, taking her by the wrist.
Amaia flinched at this sudden action, but relax slightly. His grasp wasn’t threatening.
‘You're Tristan’ Amaia said to him as it suddenly hit her. ‘White Feather told me about you.’
‘Your fairy, I know. You would have lost all memory of me. That doesn’t matter now, we can talk about it later. Now hurry’ Tristan said briskly, pulling her gently to her feet. ‘We have to go.’
Amaia allowed herself to be pulled out of the cell and down the corridor; she saw something curious as she went. Walking in the other direction towards the cell she had just come from,

another young woman was being taken by a guard wearing a crest of a wolf running up a mountainside. The woman looked strangely similar to Amaia, she even had green hair. Amaia saw the expression on the young woman's face as she passed by.
It was terror.
Amaia glanced quickly behind her as she was pulled forwards by Tristan, seeing the woman being pushed into the cell she had just left, the door was slammed shut and locked behind her. She looked ahead again, stumbling as she followed the prince.
They ran this way and that down the corridors that split and turned and twisted. White Feather had been right, this prison was a maze.
Minutes later as they were reaching the end of the corridor, Amaia saw the mouth of the tunnel was growing larger, opening up to the outside world that shone in a pure white light, beyond which nothing yet could be seen.
'We have to be quick' Tristan said hurriedly back to her. 'The guards will be gone only for a moment. We cannot let ourselves be seen, or else…' he broke off, and never finished his sentence.
They reached the end of the tunnel and Amaia shielded her eyes at the bright day outside, having become so accustomed to the dark prison behind her, she was temporarily blinded.
'Come on' Tristan hastened, pulling her along.
The dazzling open world was a welcoming thing to experience after the cramped and murky cell Amaia had been forced to endure for days. But she left that all behind her now, as the two of them ran across the muddy ground. A narrow river trickling water followed them as Tristan led Amaia towards a lone horse that waited. Amaia glanced back at the tunnel entrance briefly, gasping in shock at the size of the building which sat atop the prison.'
'The king's palace…' she breathed.
Tristan grimaced, pursing his lips but not pausing. The palace was built high into the sky, and was unmistakable. No other building in the kingdom came even close to the prestige and extravagance the king's home possessed. It was a striking, powerful looking building, but even though Amaia had never seen it before with her own eyes, there could be no mistake. This was the back of the building.
'The king kidnapped me' Amaia said. 'A secret passage to a prison at the back of the palace… what it this?'
'We cannot linger' Tristan urged her. 'The longer we stay…'
'No!' Amaia cried, suddenly pulling back from Tristan and trying to free herself from his grasp. 'White Feather is still in there! We have to go back for him.'
'We've no time.'
'We *have* to' Amaia demanded.
'It's too late for him.'
'I won't leave him!' Amaia shot firmly back. 'I would rather die; he risked his life for me.'
'Amaia' Tristan said turning back to her, his patience wearing thin. 'He's dead.'
Amaia gasped; her whole body beginning to tremble.
'No…' she whispered. 'No…'
Her legs weakened, and she fell to her knees, fainting. Tristan wasted no more time, lifting her in his arms and continuing his way to the waiting horse. He placed her on the saddle of the animal, mounting the chestnut stallion behind her. Holding her in place with one arm so

she wouldn't fall, he grabbed the reins with the other, kicking the horse hard into a gallop and getting as far away from the palace as possible, as fast as possible, until the trees consumed them. Only then did he allow the exhausted animal to slow to a walk.
Amaia began to stir sometime later. Tristan felt her move as she lifted her head groaning, for a moment she just sat there in silence, confused.
'It's alright' Tristan said gently to her, arm still around her waist to support her.
'Where are we?' she mumbled.
'Somewhere safe' he told her. 'It's going to be ok. You're safe now. I'll look after you. I'll keep you hidden.'
'White Feather' Amaia sobbed, hands covering her face. 'He's dead. How could this happen? Oh, White Feather……I'm so sorry…'
'There was nothing you could have done.'
'I feel so guilty…. this is all my fault.'
'It's not!' Tristan shot angrily at her. 'It's *not* your fault.'
'How could he be dead? He was the most important thing in my life…how could this happen…? Why does this keep happening…? I've lost so much…'
'Shhh' Tristan said to her. 'Be still. Everything's going to be alright now.'
Amaia allowed her eyelids to droop. She fell into an uneasy state, somewhere between dreaming and waking.
When the horse Tristan was guiding finally slowed to a stop, Amaia opened her eyes, looking up to see a rundown thatched cottage in the woods. It was a vast wood; they had not left it since they first entered it some unknown time ago. The cottage looked grim and had long since been abandoned; the garden around it was as overgrown as the forest the cottage was built in.
Tristan dismounted. Amaia feeling too weak to move allowed him to pull her from the saddle and carry her in his arms to the cottage. The door opened before they got there. Two women, one young and one mature stood there waiting for them. Tristan entered the cottage; the older woman closed the door after him.
'Run a bath for her' Tristan told the two servants as he lowered Amaia to her feet. 'Have her washed and dress and put to bed.'
'Come on dear' the older lady said, placing an arm around her shoulders and leading her to the next room. 'It's all alright now. We'll look after you.'
Tristan left to go into another room as Amaia was undressed by the two women and led to a bath that was waiting for her. The bath was already full and the water warm. Everything had been made ready for her arrival and everything was laid out for her.
The younger woman took her old dress out of the room to throw it away, as the older lady helped her into the bath. Amaia's skin had darkened with dirt, and her light green hair which was usually thick and full of volume, now hung down from her skull, thick with grease and filth.
'You poor thing' the lady said, dabbing a clean cloth into the soapy water and beginning to clean her face. 'You must really have been through something terrible.'
Amaia didn't answer. In fact, she didn't speak at all. She remained lethargic as they washed her, dressed her, brushed her hair and put her to bed. There, she slept for nearly an entire day.

Chapter Sixty-One
A White World

When Amaia woke, she woke gradually. First, she slept for a long time in a deep slumber; then slowly, her mind became more and more conscious. She heard strange sounds around her, birds outside, unknown noises coming from downstairs. She dreamed about these noises, and put objects and actions to them. She began to shift in her sleep, feeling more awake, and strange in an unfamiliar bed. She turned over, and opened her eyes.

The room she found herself in was bright. The window behind her was very large, but there was no glass in the frame. It was chilly inside the cottage; a cool breeze lifted the faded brown curtains either side of the window. Amaia shivered, pulling the thick blankets tighter around her. She lay there, staring at the room before her. It was a bare room, with wooden walls and floors, there was nothing else inside the room beside the bed she lay on.

Amaia let out a breath, blinking slowly several times, before closing her eyes again.

She stayed in the bed for another hour or so, before rising.

At last, when Amaia felt she was fully rested, she pushed back the sheets and stood. She looked down at herself, feeling clean and refreshed. She was wearing a long white nightdress that she had been given by the servants. It fit her well, as if it had been chosen especially for her frame. She patted herself down, straightening the creases, before lifting her head again.

Amaia gazed about herself at the room again, taking in her surroundings and becoming familiar with them. It was a small room, and at a glance, it looked like it had been left unoccupied for several years now. Through the open window, Amaia could see the forest beyond thrived, the trees grew thick and the leaves were lush and green.

She drew a deep breath, hugging herself against the chill as she padded lightly across the room, the wooden floor cold against her feet. She shivered as she opened the door.

Amaia stepped out into the corridor, glancing over the balcony to the ground floor below where the kitchen was. Amaia descended the wooden stairs, seeing Tristan sitting at the table. He looked up as he heard her footsteps, smiling widely at the sight of her.

‘Amaia’ he beamed. ‘You're awake at last. How do you feel?’

Amaia reached the last step, turning and facing him in silence.

‘Here’ Tristan said, rising and pulling a chair out from the table, opposite from where he sat.

‘Come on’ Tristan said encouragingly to her when she didn’t move. ‘Have a seat.’

Amaia hesitated, then took a step forward towards the chair offered. She took a seat, and Tristan moved back around the table, returning to his own chair.

Amaia observed the man sitting opposite her as he called for one of the servants.

‘What do you want?’ he said to Amaia.

‘I'm sorry?’ she whispered.

‘To eat’ he said. ‘What do you want to eat? You must be starving.’

‘Oh.’

‘When was the last time you ate a good meal?’

‘I…’ Amaia began, ‘don’t remember.’

‘What would you like?’

‘I don’t know’ Amaia said.
‘I suppose it doesn’t matter. Diana’ he called to the servant.
The elder one hurried up to him.
‘Could you bring her some breakfast? Anything would do.’
‘Of course,’ the servant bowed.
A short time passed, in which Amaia and Tristan waited in silence, listening to the sounds of food being prepared in the kitchen, plates being moved, cutlery being moved, sausages spitting in the pan. Then Diana returned with a full plate of food. A good breakfast, eggs and bread and meat, and some fruit juice on the side. She placed these before Amaia and went away.
‘Eat up’ Tristan told her.
‘Could you explain to me what's happening?’ Amaia said to Tristan, ignoring her food completely. ‘Who are you really? What am I doing here?’
‘I've told you who I am. I'm your father. You're my daughter. I brought you here for your safety.’
‘It’s not that’ Amaia said. ‘I want to know the whole story. There is so much I feel I do not understand. If you're really my father, who are the people I grew up with? If you're really my father, why didn’t I grow up with you? And who is my real mother?’
Tristan sighed deeply, leaning back in his chair. ‘You’ve been through a lot, both of us have, but you most of all…’ he broke off. ‘What you have suffered…it was so unfair. You didn’t deserve any of it.’
‘Why?’ Amaia asked Tristan, her voice breaking. ‘Why have I suffered so much?’
Tristan sighed again, averting his gaze.
‘I miss White Feather’ Amaia mumbled.
Tristan looked back at her.
‘I will tell you everything you want to know…in time. You have been through so much. I want you to stay here, to heal. Then I will answer all of your questions, but for the meantime, you need to rest…please.’
‘Alright’ Amaia submitted. ‘But do you promise to tell me what I need to know, and answer *all* of my questions *truthfully*?’
‘Yes’ Tristan said bowing his head. ‘I promise.’
‘Alright’ Amaia said.
‘You need to eat’ Tristan told her again. ‘You must be starving.’
‘I'm too upset to feel hungry.’
‘Upset?’
‘I miss White Feather…’
Tristan slumped in his chair wearily, watching her mournfully.
‘If you do not eat, you will waste away and become ill. Is that what White Feather would have wanted?’
Amaia glanced up at him with tears in her eyes.
Tristan pursed his lips, but said no more. Instead, he waited in silence.
Amaia began to eat. The food was good, but a short time later, Amaia was throwing up.
‘You’ve eaten too fast’ Tristan told her with concern.
‘No’ Amaia chocked, turning away from him. ‘It’s too rich.’

‘You're just not used to it’ he said. ‘You’ve spent several days living on prison food, and it’s been too long since you’ve eaten properly. Come on. Just have a bit of bread if you can.’
Amaia attempted to eat a little more. When she was done, she pushed the plate away from her, hand placed over her mouth as she forced herself to keep it down.
‘Come with me’ Tristan said.
‘What for?’ Amaia asked straightening.
‘I…think we should become familiar with each other.’
‘What do you mean?’
‘You're my daughter’ Tristan told her. ‘We should not be strangers to one another.’ He offered his hand out for her to take, but she simply looked at him. ‘Amaia’ Tristan said patiently. ‘I only want what's best for you. I know you have suffered. I know that you grieve, but…. you must not dwell on these things. You cannot alter the past. No matter how hard you wish to do so.’
He lowered his hand.
‘I will not force you to do anything you do not want to do. From now on, I will not keep you imprisoned. You can leave if you want. But it would make me very happy if you would stay, here with me.’
Amaia remained unmoved.
‘Will you come with me?’ Tristan asked.
‘Where are we going?’
‘For a ride through the woods’ he said. ‘I want to show you that I mean what I say. You are free. You are allowed to wander from this cottage.’ Tristan shifted uncomfortably when Amaia didn’t say anything. ‘There are horses tied up outside’ he offered. ‘They are already saddled…. if you want to…...I don’t want to force you, I just thought it would be good to get your mind off…but if you don’t want to…’
Amaia rose to her feet wordlessly. She held her hands before her, fingers laced together.
‘I will go with you’ she said.

Tristan mounted the dark mare waiting outside. Beside that horse waited another.
‘Can you ride?’ Tristan asked Amaia uncertainly. ‘I'm sorry…I didn’t…’
‘It’s alright’ Amaia spoke meekly approaching the animal. ‘I know horses.’
She mounted the horse with confidence, glancing expectantly to Tristan who waited beside her.
Tristan tapped his heels into the beast’s flanks, urging it onwards. Amaia followed as Tristan led the way out of the overgrown garden and through the woods. They rode at a trot for quite some time, until they reached a place where the trees did not grow, where a great mound of rock at their feet rose out from the earth in a gentle slope, higher than the rest of the woods around them.
‘The view from up there’ Tristan said to Amaia pointing towards the tip, ‘is one you might regret to miss. We are far in the woods. There are no cities or towns for miles and miles around...save for the capital.’
Amaia didn’t reply.
Tristan held the reins in one hand, resting on the saddle.
‘I think you should use your magic’ he said.

‘Why?’ Amaia mumbled weakly. ‘Each time I have used magic in my life, bad things happen. I live a normal life…a happy life…and then I use magic…and am taken from my home……I suffer…’
Tristan watched her silently.
‘The first time’ Amaia went on, ‘I used magic in front of my mother, to make a flower I picked frost over…she was furious.’
Tristan was about to object to Amaia calling Ramana her mother. But he held his tongue.
‘The second time’ Amaia continued, ‘I used my magic in front of a man, and shortly after that I was captured by soldiers and taken away in a carriage.…’
Amaia bit her lip, swallowing the lump in her throat.
Simon…
‘Shortly after I used magic…’ Amaia continued, ‘almost as if they were waiting for me…. watching me…and then you…’
‘I came to rescue you’ Tristan finished. He pursed his lips. ‘Amaia. I would never allow any harm to come to you. Not if I can help it.’ Tristan faltered then. ‘You're supposed to have lost your memory after you died’ he said to her. ‘How is it that you remember?’
‘White Feather’ Amaia spoke to the back of her horse’s neck. ‘He helped me remember. He told me everything I forgot.’ Amaia turned to face Tristan. ‘How do you know that Weather Makers lose their memories after they are reincarnated? And how did you know that I died?’
‘I….’ Tristan drew a breath. ‘I was there the day you died.’
‘What happened?’
‘It’s a day I’d rather forget.’
‘How do you know so much about Weather Makers?’ Amaia asked him.
‘My mother…’
‘Your mother is a Weather Maker?’
Tristan smiled at her weakly, feeling no conviction behind the act. ‘I’ll tell you everything you want to know. But not yet. For now, I just want you to use your powers.’
‘Why?’ she asked for the second time. ‘I will only be captured again.’
‘No’ Tristan shook his head. ‘The previous times you used magic, you did so in front of other people whom were unfamiliar with…. the situation’ he finished. ‘You are perfectly safe doing so here with me.’
‘White Feather told me the exact same thing.’
‘White Feather is not….’ Tristan suddenly cut himself off. ‘It’s unfortunate what happened to him.’
‘He must have suffered greatly’ Amaia said in grief. She hung her head, beginning to tremble.
‘If you feel so distraught, then what do you have to lose?’ Tristan asked her, trying a different tact.
Amaia faltered uncertainly at this. She thought about it for a moment.
‘Go on’ Tristan encouraged. ‘It’s been a long time since I've seen such magic. Not since my mother was herself.’
Amaia dismounted the horse, walking away from Tristan who remained in the saddle.
She moved slowly to the tip of the rocky pinnacle where there grew no trees. Amaia stood at the very highest point of the mound that jutted out of the earth, overlooking the forest that

grew below. She leant over the edge, for a moment contemplating what it would feel like to fall and hit the ground below.
She could do it, she thought. If she had to.
If she wanted.
Amaia raised her head to the sky above her. So vast. Never ending. Amaia thought then how immense the sky was, how big the world was they lived in. No matter what happened, life would go on. No matter how important a person was to someone, if they died, their absence left a gaping hole in the hearts of those they loved. But life still carried on. It had to. All these years, Amaia had been forced to endure her life after the woman whom for so long she thought to be her mother, died so violently. Murdered, trying to protect Amaia. There was so much she didn't understand. So much she still longed to know.
But more than anything in her life, she longed to see Ramana again. The woman she grew up with. The one she called for the longest time, *mother*, and who in turn, had called her daughter, *my precious treasure*.
Amaia took a deep breath. The breeze blew back her light green hair from her face.
How can it be true? She thought. *But what if it is true?* She turned to face Tristan then, with her back to the drop. *Would I want this man to be my father? Would it be so bad?*
She thought again of Ramana.
Even after all these years, she still missed her terribly. There was nothing in the world Amaia longed for more in her life than to see her again, to hold her, and tell her that she loved her and how much she had missed her.
It would only take one step backwards Amaia thought. *I did it once……I can do it again.*
'Amaia' Tristan said from atop his horse. Perhaps he suspected her thoughts, for he had become suddenly tense and uneasy. 'White Feather would have wanted you to be happy. To live.'
Amaia sobbed then, balling her fists and bowing her head.
'White Feather…I'm so sorry…'
Tristan dismounted his horse, striding up to her. He embraced Amaia firmly, holding her close, with the tenderness of someone who truly loved.
'It will all be alright in the end' he told her in a hushed voice. 'I know it's hard. I know you must have a lot of questions, but you must trust me. I would not have done so much, had you not meant so much to me.' He let go of her, stepping back. 'I want you to be happy. To be free.' His expression was that of sadness, of desperation, of loss and grief. 'Don't hold it in anymore' he told her, waiting for Amaia to react. 'Be free.'
She turned her back to him, facing the drop.
Then she lifted her head, feeling now she had nothing left to lose.
'To hell with it' she said. Then summoned her magic.
First the frost grew outwards from her feet, and the air grew cold. Tristan sighed deeply, his breath fogging in the air before him. The earth began to crackle as the frost spread outwards from the rock to the grass and then to the trees and their leaves.
Amaia groaned, furrowing her brow and squeezing her eyes tight shut as her body hunched over. She threw her arms open, casting her magic out wide. The strong breeze turned into a violent gale. Behind her Tristan braced himself, throwing an arm up to cover his eyes. The

horses reared up in fear, bolting away towards the trees that sheltered them against the wind. But Amaia didn't notice this; she knew nothing other than what she was doing.
She drew her hands together, fingers tickling the air before her, flurries of cold air and moisture forming snow before her. She threw it outwards, again and again in all directions, casting showers of snow all around her in arcs.
The clouds above them began to shift, growing heavy, growing thick.
The sun was blocked out as more clouds began to form out of nothing, turning black and ready to fall.
A great mist grew around them so that the horizon could no longer be seen, and by the time Amaia was finished, she and Tristan were trapped in an icy world. When before they could see far into the horizon around them from atop the rocky hill, in the clear and warm sunny day, now there was little to be seen beyond a short distance. It was as if they had been transported into another world. Now what they saw was a closed world, a cold world. The horizon was blocked from view by wisps of cloud. Above them the clouds were heavy and thick and black, blocking out the sun which was only visible as a golden haze. Other than the snow that fell lightly around them, all was still; even the wind had stopped blowing. Amaia glanced around. Everything was frosted with a white layer, all the trees around them, right to the tips of every leaf.
'Amaia' Tristan said with a smile to her as he observed their new surroundings. 'From now on, I want you to call me father.'
Amaia faced him reluctantly, watching him with silence.
'I'll go get the horses' he said. 'I'll be back shortly.'
Then he was gone.
Amaia turned back to the drop before her, gazing around at all she had done.
It looked beautiful, and eerie.
She smiled then, feeling happy. For so long she had kept her magic secret, hidden somewhere deep within her. Now she was free, and no matter what happed in the future, she did not regret this day.
'I did not even know I was capable of such things' she spoke to herself briefly, before moving away from the drop, and back towards the line of trees.
A short time later, Tristan returned, having caught the horses. They mounted them and headed back home.
They didn't go out for a few days after that. Amaia felt exhausted again, after using so much magic, her body was not used to such a strain. She spent most of her time after that day, sleeping and lying around. It was as if a king, who spent his days sitting about his palace, suddenly went on a long march and took part in a long battle. For the soldiers it would have been tolerable. For other Weather Makers it may not have felt so draining. But for Amaia, who had rarely used magic in her life, and had never done so to such an extent, the experience was shattering.
She used no more magic for days after that, and did not leave the cottage for ages. But when she did, she made sure Tristan saw her leave, testing whether or not she was truly allowed to come and go as she pleased. She tested whether or not he would allow her to be truly free, as he had said he would.

She made eye contact with him, before she walked through the door. He sat there and did nothing, watching her go.
'Is it safe for her to leave?' the younger servant asked the prince as she stood beside him.
'I have done what I can for her' Tristan replied solemnly. 'If she still wants to go…. then I have failed.'
'So, you think she will return?'
'Yes' Tristan said to the servant. 'I think so.'

Amaia returned several hours later.
It was many days after that, that she started calling him father, and even longer after that, when Tristan felt ready to tell her.
He sat her down, and they began to talk.
'You may ask me now what you wish' Tristan said to her. 'And I will answer.'
'Who is my father?'
'I am your father.'
'Is that the truth?'
'Yes.'
Amaia hesitated. 'Then who is my mother?'
'My wife. Her name is Olithia. You will meet her in time.'
'What's she like?'
Tristan hesitated. 'You will find out when you meet her.'
'When will that be?'
'I don't know.'
'Does she know I'm here?'
'No.'
Amaia thought for a moment.
'Who are the people I grew up with? Ramana and Farrell.'
'They are…' Tristan paused in thought, '…just a happy couple living in a small town.'
'Why did they raise me and not my own parents?'
'Because you were not safe living with us.'
'Why?'
Tristan hesitated, reluctant to answer. For the longest time he didn't speak.
'Because when you were born, we knew instantly you were a Weather Maker. You were not safe living with us…because of my father.'
'Who are you then?' Amaia asked him.
'I am the prince, thirteenth in line. I have twelve older brothers that live, and next to no chance of inheriting the throne. Not that it's in my interest anyway' he shrugged.
'A prince' Amaia repeated, brow furrowed. 'It's hard to believe that *my* father is actually a prince.'
'It's hard to believe in magic' Tristan answered simply. 'Yet you possess the skill to do such astonishing things. Is the fact that I'm a prince really so hard to believe?'
'I suppose you've got a good point there' she admitted. 'Do I have any siblings?'
'One. An older brother' Tristan said. 'He is a soldier. You will meet him in time.'

‘And…’ Amaia began, shifting uncomfortably, ‘was that man truly your father the king, the man who ordered my imprisonment…who hurt White Feather?’
‘Yes’ Tristan nodded glumly.
‘How can such a monster be your father?’ Amaia asked incredulous. ‘Be my grandfather?’
‘We don’t all turn out like our parents’ Tristan told her sadly.
‘Why would he do such a thing?’
‘His wife…my mother, is also a Weather Maker. She has fallen into a coma for some unknown reason. She has been asleep for over thirty years. My father seems to think that Weather Makers possess a power that can wake her, and return her back to the way she once was.’ Tristan sighed then, shaking his head. ‘There is no reason for him to believe what he does, but he refuses to give up hope. He loves her more than the earth……and has become a desperate man grasping at straws. He believes other Weather Makers can help him because that’s all he has left now. The hope that his beloved wife will someday return to the way she used to be, is the only thing that’s keeping him on the verge of sanity.’ Tristan lifted his head. ‘That faint hope is the only thing he lives for now. It wouldn’t take him much to tip him over the edge.’
Amaia lowered her gaze, unsure of what else to say. Finally, she asked, ‘How do you find Weather Makers?’
‘Rumours. People speak of strange things they have seen, women growing flowers at a mere touch, frost appearing in the midday sun, fire burning underwater. Word spreads from person to person until it reaches one of the king’s men, and he has many ears across the land, simply waiting for these rumours to come to them. They close in, until they eventually find the person they are looking for; then they take them away. I try to get there before my father does, but he is far more resourceful than I, and has far more men at his command. And if he catches me, who knows what he will do to me when he finds out I've been intervening. I have twelve older and more important brothers. I wouldn’t be much of a loss to him.’
‘And what does your father do to Weather Makers that he finds in the end?’
‘I don’t know exactly, but I've never seen any of them again. That is why I wanted to hide you, to keep you away from my family that was such a threat to you. The day the woman you knew as Ramana died, was the day the king found you. I intercepted his men, and took you away before they could reach the palace. But I was too late to save her.’
‘And…did Ramana and Farrell both know that I was not really their daughter?’ Amaia asked, reluctant to hear the answer.
‘Yes’ Tristan nodded. ‘Ramana had given birth to a stillborn. She was more than happy to accept you when you were still a baby.’
‘What would things have been like had that day never happened?’ Amaia asked him. ‘Would I have grown up and lived in that town forever and lived my entire life not knowing you?’
‘I don’t know’ Tristan said. ‘You are my daughter. I loved you, and I missed you dearly. But I stayed away to keep you safe, but I still kept watch over you……that’s how I……was able to save you when…...that day….’ Tristan rose to his feet suddenly. ‘You should get some rest, I'm sure you need time to think about all of this.’
He made to leave the room, but Amaia called out to him.
‘Wait!’
Tristan turned back.

‘What happens now?’ Amaia asked. ‘I mean…to me.’
Tristan opened his mouth, hesitating. ‘I haven’t planned that far in the future’ he said. ‘But for now, I want you to stay and live here, be safe, be happy…that’s all I want.’
‘That’s what I want too’ Amaia bowed her head. ‘Goodnight then’ Amaia said. ‘Father.’
Tristan smiled warmly.
‘Goodnight Amaia. It’s good to have you back.’

Chapter Sixty-Two
Sorrow and Heartache

Over the days that passed, Amaia was changing. She was slowly becoming the person Tristan thought her to be, happy and full of life. Over the days, she was showing her true personality, and so was he to her. She would lean out of the window and watch as Tristan would work in the garden at the back of the cottage, fighting to tame the overgrown bushes and tall grass that surrounded them. It was not something he normally did, being a prince, but he did it out of boredom, and later out of pride. Over the days that passed he began to help the servants more and more in their daily tasks around the old cottage. Growing up he had never done any form of cleaning, tidying or any job a woman or servant was expected to do. But now that he was doing it, he found he rather enjoyed it. Amaia would help him when she felt like it. Together they would help to paint different rooms in the cottage, find ways to make the place look nice by adding decorations and fixing the furniture, dusting the old rooms and making them look new again. Amaia had requested some fresh paint and canvases, vases for flowers they would pick in the woods; and anything else that Tristan needed to travel for. He would be gone for days at a time, and in his absence, Amaia would find that she missed him. When he would return, he would do so with a whole host of treasures. Paintings, decorations and ornaments, small carpets, cutlery and plates for the kitchen, pillows and blankets for the beds.
‘When are you next leaving?’ Amaia asked him eagerly one day.
‘Are you trying to get rid of me?’ Tristan laughed ruffling her hair.
‘No!’ she cried indignantly, slapping his hand and dancing away from him.
‘You just want more presents. Is that it?’
‘Yes!’ Amaia said, bouncing on the balls of her feet. ‘Hey!’ She said suddenly. ‘I know what would make this place feel more homely. A pet of some sorts.’
‘A pet?’
‘Yes.’
‘You have the horses.’
Amaia scoffed at that, making a face at him. ‘Horses are not a pet’ she frowned. ‘I want something I can fit on my lap. When I was young my friend and I would share a pet bird we found in the woods.’
‘Is that so’ Tristan said scratching his chin thoughtfully. ‘Well…we’re in the woods. Maybe you should start looking.’
‘Father!’ Amaia huffed moodily, planting her hands on her hips and glaring in amusement.

Tristan began to laugh at that. ‘Your mother does the exact same thing when she doesn’t get her way’ he said, ‘...which isn’t often enough’ he added under his breath. ‘Alright. I will get you a pet. What do you want?’
‘I don’t know really.’
‘How about a bird?’
‘I don’t want something caged.’
‘A dog then’ Tristan suggested. ‘Lots of people like dogs.’
‘Alright’ Amaia nodded growing excited. ‘A dog it is.’ She hugged herself suddenly, giggling in delight. ‘Oh, I can’t wait!’

A few days later, one evening after Tristan had returned from being absent for several days, the four of them were sitting quietly in the living room before the burning hearth. The two servants resting with their eyes closed, Tristan reading a book, and Amaia sitting holding a little dog that slept on her lap. A grey coloured, long-nosed skinny dog. The dog had instantly taken a liking to Amaia, and anyone else that came in his vicinity. Amaia had named him Markus.
‘You know’ Amaia spoke up, ‘this place is starting to feel like a home.’
Tristan closed the book with a smile, putting it down on his lap.
‘Good’ he said. ‘Are you happy here?’
‘Yes’ Amaia replied without a pause.
‘Good’ Tristan said again. ‘That makes me very happy.’
‘Father’ Amaia said glancing towards him. ‘Do you think we could stay here forever?’
Tristan fell silent at the thought. ‘You know, I never really thought about that.’
‘Do you think we could?’
‘I…don’t see why not. Things seem to be going well here. I don’t see there any need to leave.’
Amaia squeaked in delight, she rose to her feet, causing the sleeping dog to slide off her lap. She kissed Tristan on the cheek, before straightening again.
‘Thank you’ she said eagerly. ‘I'm going to bed now. Come Markus.’
The little dog pranced after her as she made her way upstairs. Her bedroom door closed and things became silent again.
‘Are we really to stay here?’ the younger servant asked Tristan.
‘Sure’ he said. ‘Why? Don’t you like it?’
‘I thought I would miss your other home’ the older said. ‘It was grander. But this place…’ she glanced about her. ‘It feels different. Better. More…homely.’
‘I agree’ the younger said. ‘I like it here. I would like to stay...if that is what you wish.’
‘It is’ Tristan sighed, leaning back and closing his eyes with a smile on his face. ‘Things are as they should be…at last.’

More days passed, and the four of them were slipping into a familiar routine each day. Tristan and Amaia would spend hours together; then they would go off and do their own thing, or

spend some time alone. Tristan thought Amaia was happy, and when he asked her if she was, she would smile and agree every time.
But there were some times, when she thought he wasn't watching, where she would look away into the distance with a glazed expression. She would look sad; even have tears in her eyes. After several days Tristan asked her what was bothering her, demanding her not to deny that something was wrong. Amaia eventually, reluctantly replied.
'I miss White Feather.'
Tristan's heart sank at hearing this.
'Hey' he said to her after a time. 'I know what might cheer you up. How would you like to meet your brother?'
Amaia blinked at him. 'Really?' she said. 'Do you mean it?'
'Of course.'
'When can I meet him?'
'As soon as I can bring him back.' Tristan leant forwards and kissed her forehead. 'I will leave first thing in the morning.'
The next morning, as Tristan had promised, he was up early and ready to go. He went into Amaia's room to wake her.
'Having a lie in are we?' he asked nudging her.
Amaia opened an eye, smiling up at him and wrapping the blankets tight around her.
'Are you going now?' she asked him.
'Yes.'
'Don't be long' she said, sitting up so she could hug him.
'I'll try not to be' Tristan laughed as she hung off his neck.
He gave her a tight hug, and she lay back down on her bed with Markus curled up by her belly.
'Goodbye Amaia' he said to her.
'Goodbye father.'
'Try to be awake when I get back.'
'I'll not promise' she laughed, snuggling in the blankets again and hiding Markus beneath the sheets to keep him warm.
Tristan left the room, feeling a warm glow in his heart. He left the small cottage and mounted his horse, which had already been saddled up, carrying food and supplies for the journey.
He travelled swiftly, wasting little time and resting only when he had to. It seemed that in no time at all, he was at his large home again, the one north of the town of Blackrain. It was a long journey.

'Where do you keep disappearing off to?' Olithia asked the second he had entered the door. It was as if she had been keeping a look out for him. 'If I didn't know better' Olithia went on, 'I would say that you've got another little woman hidden somewhere. Are you cheating on me?'
'Don't tempt me' Tristan scoffed. 'I've been busy doing things, nothing that concerns you.'
'Oh?'
'Where's Alan?'
'He's out hunting. He brought home a fine boar the other day. A large beast it was.'
'Do you know when he will be back?' Tristan asked.

‘Sometime tomorrow’ she said. ‘Looks like it’s just the two of us’ she added seductively.
He strode away from her before she could say another word.
A short time later, he sat at a desk in the master bedroom, writing several letters to several of his brothers explaining his absence, lying in every sentence near enough. It was a boring task, as he had so many brothers.
‘Too many…’ he grumbled under his breath, huffing as he dabbed the tip of the quill back into the ink pot and continued to write.
Minutes later, and the door to the bedroom opened.
Tristan glanced up with disinterest only briefly, seeing Olithia standing in the doorway, wearing a robe and leaning against the doorframe. He returned his attention back to the letters.
Olithia sauntered into the room, reaching out to him as she did so, and running her fingers through his hair as she went by.
Tristan put down the quill, sitting back in his chair and staring up at the ceiling. Olithia leant over him from behind. Holding his face in her hands and kissing him. He kissed her back.
She ran her hands over his body, over his shoulders and down his arms, beneath his shirt and over his chest and lower, reaching far beneath his belt.
Tristan made a sigh of pleasure, closing his eyes as his wife touched him. She stopped suddenly, withdrawing her hand and moving back.
Tristan opened his eyes again, looking forward towards the wall.
He turned his head towards Olithia, seeing her standing there with her robe hanging open. He saw that she was naked underneath.
Never taking his eyes off her, he rose slowly to his feet, moving closer. She smiled at him seductively, knowing that he wanted her. He grabbed her roughly with a predatory lust, kissing her deeply and running his hands over her naked skin to all places.
He stepped forwards, pushing her back onto the bed and moving on top of her.
She laughed as he bit her neck and shoulders, knowing she could control him, knowing he was in her power then. His teeth sunk hard into her skin, causing her to bleed. She did not seem to notice, but attacked him back with the same primal fury, clawing at his chest in her haste to get his clothes off, scratching him; cutting him.
Tristan pushed her forcefully down, before straightening and unbuckling his belt. Seconds later, he moved towards her again, bearing down on her and kissing her, as his hand moved between her legs.
Olithia tensed suddenly, throwing her head back and moaning in pleasure and Tristan thrust forwards, each taking their pleasure from the other.

When he had finished, he pulled away from her, rolling onto his back and lying beside her, breathing heavily as she did.
Olithia beside him sighed in contentment, smiling up at the ceiling. She giggled then, hand going to her mouth. She rolled over on her side, caressing Tristan and rubbing her hand over his chest as she lay propped up on an elbow.
She leant forward to kiss him, but Tristan turned his head away from her, to face the wall instead.

She smirked at this, running her hand down his body and between his legs, clutching at him firmly. Tristan flinched slightly, but did nothing.
She giggled again, kissing him on the cheek swiftly before getting up to leave.
Olithia closed the door behind her, leaving Tristan alone.
He grabbed the sheet beside him and pulled it over to cover his body, waiting for sleep to come to him, and feeling thoroughly unsatisfied.

The next day, at midday, Alan returned.
'How was the hunt?' Tristan asked him when he entered the room.
'Fruitful' Alan nodded, but did not elaborate.
'Do you fancy another long ride?' Tristan asked him.
'What for?'
'We're going to meet your sister.'
Alan hesitated, becoming uncertain. 'That's where you've been all this time' he said to his father. 'You've found her.'
'I have.'
'What's she like?'
'You'll know when you see her' Tristan said. 'When are you ready to leave?'
'Now.'
'Good.'
'What about mother' Alan asked. 'Is she coming?'
'I…. don't know. I'm worried she will cause problems. Last time she met Amaia…'
'I wasn't there last time she met Amaia' Alan finished. 'Things will be different this time, I promise. You know you can't keep mother away forever. If you invite her, she will be a lot more complacent.'
'I suppose you're right.'
'She'll be thrilled when I tell her' Alan said.
'I don't doubt' Tristan replied dryly, his tone unconvinced.
And so, when Tristan returned to the little cottage in the woods many days later, he did so with not one, but two figures that accompanied him. His son Alan and his wife Olithia.
'Now Olithia' Tristan said carefully to her. 'Amaia is only expecting me to return with Alan. She must be nervous enough as it is, so I am going first alone to tell her that I'm back; then I'm going to introduce Alan, and then you. Do you understand?'
'Yes' Olithia smiled sweetly back at him.
The many long hours of riding on horseback for days on end had not fazed her or seemed to have tired her in the least. Not even sleeping out in the wilderness. It was as if she thrived in the challenge.
Tristan turned away from her uncertainly, leaving his wife and son to wait in the woods a short distance from the cottage, while he went to inform Amaia of his return.
He came back to them minutes later, and left again with Alan following after him. Olithia waited patiently.

Amaia sat nervously just outside the door of the cottage for her brother to appear, seated on a wooden bench in the garden that was now well tended and beautiful. In her arms she held some gifts she had made for her brother. A handful of beautiful and unusual flowers she had picked deep in the woods, they were tied together with brown string. And sweets she had made herself. They were chewy on the outside, with sweet liquid in the middle, and were dusted with sugar. She rose as Tristan reappeared; walking behind him was another figure.

He was a large figure, built like an ox with muscular shoulders and beefy arms. He was taller than Tristan. There was not much resemblance between the two, but as Amaia watched them approach, she saw their mannerisms were alike. The way they walked, the expressions they gave. Tristan stopped before her smiling.

'Amaia' he said. 'This is Alan, your brother.'

Amaia glanced nervously up at him. He was an intimidating looking figure who towered over her, wearing light leather armour that was well worn, and a sword at his side. Amaia felt a twinge of nervousness at that, wondering if they were expecting to be attacked. She gazed back at his large profile, thinking that he could snap her like a twig if he wanted. But another thought quickly followed that one. He could surely overpower any other man with ease, including his father, including anyone who might want to harm them.

'Alan' Tristan said to him. 'This is your sister Amaia.'

'Hello' Alan said.

'I…hello' Amaia replied nervously. 'I brought you come gifts.'

'I don't like sweets' Alan said instantly.

Amaia faltered. She waited uncertainly.

Alan reached towards her, pulling one of the flowers tied in the bundle. He brought it to his face, smelling the sweet scent.

'I love this flower' he said. 'It's one of my favourites.' He kindly smiled down at her, offering the flower back. 'Come with me' he said. 'Let's walk in the woods where these flowers grow. Let's talk and catch up on all the years we've missed.'

Tristan took the gifts from her as she made to leave. He gave her an encouraging wink as she went. Alan offered Amaia his arm, and together they walked away from the cottage and into the woods.

'I think they will get along just fine' a voice said from behind Tristan.

'I told you to wait' Tristan glowered at Olithia as she came out of hiding.

'No, you didn't' Olithia replied teasingly. 'You said no such thing. You said you will introduce Alan first, then me. You said nothing at all about waiting.'

'You know what I meant' Tristan scowled.

'I did' Olithia said, coming to stand beside him. 'And I didn't let her see me, did I?'

Tristan turned away from her resentfully, unable to think of anything to say in response. So he said nothing.

It was several hours later when Amaia and Alan returned, and when they did, they both seemed happy. And then Olithia introduced herself to Amaia, speaking over Tristan as he was about to do so.

Olithia smiled at Amaia. 'I'm sure we will get on well together' she said.

It was many weeks that the family lived at the cottage together. Despite having lived for so many years in large and lush halls with numerous servants, all of them fit well into the tiny cottage with only two servants, and Amaia found that she was feeling more at home here than she had anywhere in years. She was growing accustomed to the people that lived with her now, and they all started feeling like a family to her. Even Olithia.

Over the days that passed, Amaia regularly used her magic. For fun, or for practical purposes. She would help to light fires, warm rooms, grow flowers, and used her magic to make it rain. Other times, she would play games to make the others rejoice. She one day made it snow indoors. Another day she created the most beautiful displays of light in the night's sky. For a short time, Amaia felt nervous for using her magic, in case someone came to take her away from this good life. As had happened before. But the more she used her magic and nothing happened, the more she wanted to use it. For the longest time things went well. And then one day, Alan was called away.

Amaia went downstairs several days after that to find Olithia sitting at the kitchen table; her face looked as if it were carved out of stone, and Tristan, just stood in the middle of the kitchen, staring at nothing.

'Father?' Amaia asked him uncertainly. 'What's wrong?'

'Amaia.' Tristan turned to her. 'Your brother's dead.'

Chapter Sixty-Three
The Soldier

Weeks later, and life at the little cottage was not the same. Amaia asked to be taken somewhere else, a place that did not remind her of the time she had spent with her brother in the few short weeks she had known him. The woods where they walked; the kitchen where they had laughed and shared jokes. And before the fire where they played games for hours and spoken for hours.

'You've always told me you like healing' Tristan said to Amaia one day.

'Yes', she answered flatly.

'I know of a temple where holy women heal travellers and those in need. They live in the temple, and lead peaceful lives helping others. Perhaps you would like to stay there? At least for the meantime.'

'But what if someone finds out who and what I am?' Amaia asked in a dead tone. 'What if someone finds out I'm a Weather Maker?'

'As long as you cover your green hair, and *never* use your powers in front of *anybody*, you will be safe. I promise.'

'Do you mean it?'

‘I want you to be happy’ Tristan urged. ‘I want you to be free. And I will *never* imprison you again. *Never*. I've made that mistake once, and you were unhappy for the longest time…’
‘I will go if you allow it’ Amaia mumbled to the floor.
‘Then I will allow it’ Tristan said, placing a hand gently upon her shoulder.
And so, a short time later, Amaia was wearing the white robes and light blue sash of the holy women. She was given the false name of Layla. Her hair was covered always unless she was alone, and she never used her powers.

Here she stayed for a short time, until one day, a soldier grabbed her wrist.

Part 4

Chapter Sixty-Four
After Years of Searching

‘Defiled! Defiled! Our temple had been defiled!’
The dead soldier lay still bleeding, and Farrell turned to her.
‘It cannot be’ he whispered.
He fell to his knees.
‘My prayers have been answered…’
‘What?’ she gasped uncertainly, her chest rising and falling as she breathed deeply, still in shock at what had just happened.
‘Please…’ Farrell breathed, reaching a shaking hand towards her. ‘Please let it be you…my daughter.’
The woman drew away from him, getting her feet beneath her ready to stand.
She rose slowly, as if standing before a frightened deer that was ready to bolt. The man on his knees stared back at her, his eyes never leaving her face.
Amaia straightened up, her palms sweating, staring down to the man before her. Closing her mouth and biting her lip. She recognised him. It was the man in the painting she had seen in the home she had grown up in. The man that in the painting that had stood next to Ramana.
He looked different, older, greyer, more worn. But there was no mistake. It was definitely him.
She opened her mouth again to speak.
‘Father?’
His face immediately lit up, and the tears he had been holding back spilled freely down his cheeks. He sobbed, biting his fist to control himself. Then he laughed. He laughed and laughed, tears still falling continuously.
‘Kill me now for I must be dreaming’ he said falling on all fours. ‘Surely the gods would not bless me so after all the wrong I've done?’

Her heart felt as if it had leapt high into her throat. She held her hands over her mouth, feeling nothing but astonishment, and then an overwhelming sadness. A wave of emotions crashed over her like she had never felt before. She ran to him, falling on her knees and holding him tightly.

'Please tell me it's really you, please.' She let go of him, looking into his face; then embraced him again. 'I knew you'd find me….'

'Amaia…' Farrell sobbed into her shoulder. 'My daughter…' he pushed her back gently so that he may look at her, caressing her face with his crippled hand. 'I cannot believe this moment is happening' he said, both laughing and crying at the same time. 'You're so beautiful…you look just like your mother.' And then he hesitated, as if caught suddenly by mournful thoughts. 'Do you remember her Amaia? Do you remember your mother?'

'No' she shook her head, tears filling her eyes. 'I…I've lost my memory.'

'Come' he whispered to her, rising. 'Come with me.'

He led her across the hall to a fountain, walking with his arm around her shoulders as he did so.

'Sit with me' Farrell said to her.

Amaia sat beside her father, watching him with silent expectation.

'Would you like to hear about your mother?' Farrell asked her.

'I would love that' she whispered.

'Good' Farrell laughed, his smile almost reaching his ears. 'Now…let's see' Farrell began, feeling almost uncomfortable sitting next to her, his own daughter that had become so foreign. He wondered what he should say. 'Where do I begin?' he laughed.

He thought for a moment.

'Your mother' Farrell began after a time, '…she was quite a character. She was so happy all the time…. well…most of the time…when she was in a bad mood, it was like the devil itself living inside our home. I remember…shortly after you were born…. she practically threw me out of my own home…' he laughed nervously then. 'She was…very emotional' he spoke looking to the floor. 'I remember…...um…...' he shook his head trying to think. 'She used to throw books at me when she was angry…she tried to throw a grandfather clock at me once.' He glanced to Amaia, who gave him a curious expression. 'But you don't want to hear about that I'm sure' Farrell said hastily. 'You want to hear the good side, don't you? Let me think…. oh, she liked to paint, *loved* to paint. She was very good at it too, oh and she liked to climb trees. She built you a tree house one day. Do you remember? You and your cousin Gracie found a bird that had fallen out of its nest…. you called it….oh gods what was its name? I don't remember.' He frowned furiously. 'And that time you and your mother attacked me with paint in the house? Do you remember that?' he glanced at Amaia nervously, clenching his jaws as he did so. She gazed back at him, uncertainly. Farrell clicked his fingers. 'The two of you used to paint together? One day we all posed for a painting?'

'Yes' Amaia breathed; her heart jolting at the memory. 'I remember that. I wouldn't sit still.'

'Yes!' Farrell said triumphantly. 'Your mother use to always pander to you, it made me so mad when she didn't listen to me……but I could never stay mad at her for long, never.' He thought for a moment, 'she used to dance with me, used to sing sometimes …. the both of you made me so happy…...I…...' Farrell took a deep breath. 'She stuck by me…. even through the most difficult of times. She was a good person your mother' Farrell nodded to

himself. ‘Her heart was pure. That’s what your mother was like, she was really sweet. She would choose to help others before helping herself, even if it was a big trouble for her to do so. Now what else…?’ he laughed uncertainly. Farrell looked around him, as if it would help him remember what he should say. ‘She uh……uh……your mother…. she was……’
Farrell lifted a hand slowly to his face and made an action to run his fingers through his hair, but stopped.
‘She was……’ he began to tremble. Tears filled his eyes and ran down his cheeks. ‘Ramana…’ he whispered.
Farrell hunched forwards, burying his head in his hands. ‘Amaia…. I’m sorry…. I’m so sorry……. this is all my fault. I've caused you so much pain. If I hadn’t been caught up in my grief, then I would have……I would have….’
‘Father….?’
Farrell looked up at his daughter who had touched his shoulder lightly.
‘Amaia’ he laughed through his tears. ‘Not you too. Silly girl.’ He reached forwards, brushing the tears from her cheeks. ‘I shouldn’t be sad…I know. I just miss her so much.’ He drew back away from her. ‘I'm sorry for all the pain I've caused you over the years…. I’m sorry that I failed you…’
She rose from her seat; kneeling before him on the floor she embraced him, holding him around his middle. Farrell held her tightly back, awash with emotions that overflowed within him. A tear slid down his cheek as he squeezed his eyes tight shut, in his mind thanking the gods for this moment, this wonderful moment.
And then he thought of *her*.

Ramana. I've found her. I've finally found her

Our precious treasure

Chapter Sixty-Five
Faith

‘Arlen!’ Farrell burst through the door without warning.
‘What!’ Arlen gasped, grabbing his chest suddenly. ‘I was sleeping. Gods you near enough game me a heart attack…next time can’t you kno-’
‘I've found Amaia’ Farrell blurted. ‘I've found her!’ He swooped up to Arlen and held him either side of his face, smiling with tears running down his cheeks. ‘She’s alive! And well.’
Arlen stared at him blankly for several seconds, taking a long time to process what Farrell had just said.
‘Where is she?’ Arlen demanded urgently grabbing him by the shoulders and shaking him. ‘Where?!’

‘Please’ Farrell said, raising a hand to try to calm both himself and Arlen. ‘She’s a little nervous…. understandably. Just……just try to calm down a little.’
Arlen forced himself to sit back, taking several deep breaths to steady himself, but his hands wouldn’t stop shaking.
‘Ok’ he said breathing deeply again. ‘Please’ he said slowly, trying to stop himself from trembling. ‘Show me where she is. But wait!’ he added suddenly as Farrell straightened up again. ‘I have to do something first.’
Arlen rose from the bed, throwing back the sheets and making his way to a dresser nearby.
‘Get me some water’ he waved to Farrell behind him. ‘Don’t ask just do it’ he added hastily, seeing Farrell’s reflection open its mouth to question.
Farrell closed his mouth again, rushing off to get a bowl of water, returning shortly after and placing it on the dresser before Arlen uncertainly.
‘Good’ Arlen smiled, dabbing a rag into the cool water. ‘Just wait there’ he said to Farrell, lifting the damp rag to his face and wiping away the black paint from around his eyes.
Seconds later, he took a razor from the dresser, and lifted it to his cheek.
Farrell watched in silence as Arlen worked, doing so slowly and carefully so as not to cut himself, but Farrell could see his brother’s hand still shaking slightly.
A few minutes later, Arlen placed the razor back upon the dresser, using the rag now to wash his face. He surveyed his own reflection with satisfaction, before turning back to Farrell.
Farrell smiled widely at the sight, unable to stop himself. He saw now in his brother a reflection of his old self, the brother he used to know. He still had the scars, the broken nose, but without the beard and black paint around his eyes, Farrell could see Arlen again. He had aged, as had Farrell, but he was still there.
‘I don’t want to scare her now’ Arlen smiled, ‘do I?’
‘You look…’ Farrell began, ‘…great.’
‘I’d settle for presentable’ Arlen smirked. ‘But thank you.’
He took a slow and steady breath.
‘Lead the way’ he said to Farrell. ‘I am ready to see her.’

They walked slowly out of the healing rooms and through the temple, Arlen’s heart racing in his chest as they went. He could not remember feeling more nervous in his entire life. His palms were sweating, and there was a lump in his throat that he could not swallow. And his mind was ablaze.
They rounded a corner, and then he saw her.
Amaia turned towards Arlen, and their eyes met.
Arlen’s hand went to his mouth at the sight of her, freezing on the spot for a moment and holding his breath, tears coming to his eyes.
No, he thought to himself as he fought back the tears. *I mustn’t cry. Ramana wouldn’t want me to cry.*
Arlen lowered his hand, and forced himself to breathe steadily.
Arlen and Farrell approached her.
‘Amaia’ Farrell said to her. ‘This is Arlen. Your uncle.’
Arlen smiled widely, looking down on her.
‘Hello Amaia. It’s so good to see you again.’

Farrell left them to be alone together, allowing the pair to get to know each other again. Arlen spoke to Amaia, as Farrell had done so before him.
'Before you were born' Arlen was saying to her, 'your mother and I were very close. I don't know if I should tell you this, but…before your mother loved your father, she loved me, and I loved her.'
'Really?' Amaia said, surprised at this. 'I never knew.'
'I never wanted you to, but now that you're old enough…. well…some things should not be kept a secret forever.'
'Then what happened?' Amaia asked. 'Between you and my mother.'
'I convinced her to marry your father' Arlen explained.
'But why? Didn't you love her?'
'I did love her' Arlen smiled with distant eyes as he thought of Ramana. 'I loved her very much. But…I could never give her the life that she deserved. I had very little back then. No reputation, barely any money, and a home that was fit only for a beggar. How could I possibly raise children in such a way? How could I have married a woman knowing that I could not give her a good home or care for her properly?'
'If you truly loved each other' Amaia said, 'then that shouldn't have mattered.'
'No' Arlen shook his head. 'It was because I loved her so much that I asked her to marry my brother. And it was only because my brother cared so much about me that he agreed.'
'You mean they did not love each other?' Amaia asked him in shock.
'Not in the beginning' Arlen explained. 'My brother did not want to marry Ramana, and Ramana did not at first like Farrell. Not at all. But the years have a way of changing people, and over time, their love grew.'
'I know' Amaia beamed, arms wrapped around a knee as they sat on a stone bench before a great statue of the goddess Kachi. 'I don't know much about love, but I knew my parents loved each other very much. I remember how happy they were together.' She glanced sideways towards Arlen. 'What was it that made you love my mother?' Amaia asked him.
A smile flickered across Arlen's face then. 'You know' he said facing her. 'Your mother asked me exactly the same thing when we were still new to each other. Let me see if I can remember. Gods she was so beautiful' he sighed, fighting back tears, 'just like you.' He turned to Amaia. 'You look so much like her; I feel…that in a way…I am talking to her, through you.'
He laughed then, covering his eyes with a hand.
'This feels so strange to me' he said, 'speaking to you after all this time……after I thought I had lost you forever. It's almost too much for me. But I know that if she were here, she would tell me not to cry, so I'm trying hard not to, for her.' He sighed, lowering his hand again. 'I fell in love with your mother, from the very first moment I lay eyes upon her. I remember that day so clearly, it was one of the best days in my life. The day I first met her...'

Arlen was just leaving the temple at this time, walking with eyes down and staring at his own feet. He lifted his head, just as a woman was approaching him.

The world seemed to slow. Arlen turned towards the woman just as she passed him by, so near to him she was.
His heart stopped, his eyes grew wide, and his breath was completely stolen away.
He slowed to a stop, staring at her as she walked away. She did not acknowledge him, but seemed to be in a world of her own.
Arlen stayed rooted to the spot, frozen. He could not move.

'It was as if she had put a spell upon me' Arlen mumbled in a distant voice. 'From the very first moment I lay eyes on her, I thought to myself, *I have to have her*.'
'What made you fall in love with her?' Amaia asked him. 'If you only saw her for the first time and didn't speak to her.'
'You know' Arlen glanced at her happily. 'Your mother asked me the exact same thing.'

The sunlight above cast moving patterns though the leaves upon the forest floor. Shielding his eyes Arlen squinted at Ramana as she lay next to him. She grinned at him cheekily.
'I like it when you make funny faces' she said.
'I'm not making funny faces' he told her indignantly. 'This is just my face.'
She giggled at him, rolling onto her side she propped herself up on an elbow, resting her head in a hand.
'You're so cute' she said to him.
'I'm not trying to be cute.'
'I know' she beamed back at him. 'That's what I find cutest of all.'
Arlen lowered his hand, turning his head to face her properly as he rested on his back against the cool grass in the forest.
'You say the silliest things sometimes' he smiled warmly.
She glowed, looking ever more beautiful.
'So' she said to him, tickling him as he tried to squirm away from her. 'A handsome man such as yourself chased by every woman who lays eyes upon you…. what made you choose me?'
'What do you mean?' Arlen asked her, weaving his fingers through hers.
'I mean…' she chuckled, poking his nose. 'Why did you fall in love with me? I didn't know who you were when you started sending me gifts.' Her eyes glistened as she watched him closely, waiting for a response. 'What was it about me that you liked?'
'It was love at first sight' Arlen breathed, never taking his eyes from her.
'But women throw themselves at your feet' Ramana told him. 'Why haven't you fallen for any of them?'
'It's not like that' Arlen said frowning and shoving her lightly.
Ramana flicked his hand away, pushing him back and giggling.
'Women don't throw themselves at my feet' Arlen told her.
'Yes they do.'
'No' Arlen said in mock irritation. 'They don't.'
'Well,' Ramana continued. 'Why didn't you like any of them?'

'I was waiting for the right person' Arlen replied.
'But why were none of them the right person?' She asked him.
'You mean those pampered spoilt women who think they are better than everyone else because they are richer, or better looking? Or because their parents are important people? The type of woman who spends hours every day painting her face and preening herself? The type of women who has so little care in the world besides themselves, they spend hours living inside their own heads? You want to know why I'm not interested in them?'
'Alright' Ramana smiled, satisfied at the answer. 'What was it about me that made you fall in love with me before you even knew me?'
'It was what I saw about you' Arlen grinned.
'What do you mean?' Ramana asked teasingly.
'I have seen so many women of the type who choose to spend their whole lives inside, knowing nothing of the real world. Not even caring to find out, women who do nothing with their lives. But when I saw you, I saw the kind of person you are.'
'Oh?' Ramana winked, curious now.
Arlen reached forward, brushing her hair back.
'You look so beautiful all the time' he told her. 'But I like it best when your hair is down.'
'It's a good thing I always have it down then' Ramana said, resting her head against the ground with her hands stuck out before her, poking Arlen's stomach repeatedly.
Arlen tried to fend himself off, waving his hands at hers.
'I saw a lot about your character that day' Arlen continued, catching her waving hands in his. 'That day you walked past me. That day I first laid eyes upon you, I saw your beauty and magnificence.'
'Oh stop' she laughed, slapping his shoulder lightly.
He flicked her nose playfully in response.
'Go on' Ramana told him when they had calmed again. 'What did you see about my character?'
'Your fingers' he told her.
'Fingers?' she made a funny face at him. 'You fell in love with me because of my fingers?'
'Yes. I mean no.' Arlen made a sound of exasperation. 'You had paint on your fingers' Arlen went on, 'which means you like to paint, you are creative. There were twigs in your hair, and dirt on your dress that made it look like you had been kneeling. I thought you perhaps like to garden, maybe you like flowers; maybe you have a collection of them. And the twigs in your hair, how did they get there? Were you walking through the woods, or perhaps climbing a tree? You didn't wear any makeup, but you were more beautiful without it. You dressed in vibrant red and walked with your head held high; I saw you were a confident person, proud, and strong. That is the woman I have spent my life searching for, that is the woman I want to spend the rest of my life with. And when I heard you sing…' Arlen took a deep breath. 'I was completely blown away.'
Ramana smiled proudly at Arlen. She leant forward to kiss him.

Amaia threw her head back, laughing heartily.

‘Is that what you said to her when she asked? That you fell in love with my mother because of her fingers?’
Arlen laughed with her, unable to stop himself, feeling within him a joy so pure and strong; he had felt nothing like it since the day Ramana died. Amaia reminded him so much of the woman he had fallen in love with all those years ago, and to hear her laugh, and to know that she was happy…...
Arlen grinned widely to himself.
It was the best feeling in the world.
‘No’ Arlen replied to Amaia, frowning in mock annoyance. ‘I told you, it’s what the paint on her fingers said about her.’ He chuckled to himself. ‘You know, she found that funny too when I told her.’
‘I'm sure she did’ Amaia smiled.
Arlen stared at her. He lifted a hand to brush her cheek.
‘Amaia’ he said, his tone turning serious. ‘I just want you to know, that I never stopped looking for you, since the day you first went missing. I never gave up hope.’
‘I believe you’ she whispered.
‘And I’ve felt regret every day for not….’ He swallowed the lump in his throat, glancing away from Amaia and withdrawing his hand, before briefly looking back at her. ‘I sorry I couldn’t protect your mother. I should have been there.’
‘It’s not your fault’ Amaia said, taking his hand in hers and holding tightly. ‘You did everything you could.’
Arlen opened his mouth as if about to protest.
‘You searched for me’ Amaia spoke over him before he could interrupt. ‘You never gave up on me. That’s all that matters.’
Arlen sighed, resigning to smile again, biting back his words.
‘Yeah’ he said. ‘I guess you're right.’
Amaia beamed back at him, glowing, she looked so beautiful, so perfect, as if she was created by the gods themselves.
‘I've missed you’ Arlen said to her. ‘So very much.’
‘As have I’ she replied.
She let go of Arlen’s hand suddenly, catching sight of a figure standing in the doorway, she gasped, leaning back away from him.
‘You!’ Arlen snarled at the prince, rising to his feet. ‘What are *you* doing here?’
Tristan’s eyes slid from Amaia to Arlen and back again. Behind him stood a small group of armoured soldiers bearing the crest of the prince, a wolf running up a mountain side.
Arlen called for his brother, who was not far away. Seconds later he appeared.
‘What is this?’ Farrell demanded of Tristan, glaring angrily. ‘Where did you go and why did you leave us? And why are you here now?’
‘I've come for my daughter’ Tristan said.
‘You deceived us! You knew where she was……I knew it was wrong to trust you’ Farrell spat baring his teeth. ‘She is *not* your daughter! Your own lies you’ve twisted to truth in your mind.’ He fell silent, breathing heavily, shoulders rising up and down as he cracked his knuckles in anger. ‘She is *not* your daughter’ Farrell said defiantly at him. ‘She is mine, and I will not let you take her away from me.’

Arlen quickly rushed up to him, placing a hand upon Farrell's to stop him drawing his sword.
'We cannot fight here' Arlen spoke loudly to everyone. 'Not in this holy temple.' He turned to Farrell, speaking quietly in a whisper. 'Not in front of *her*.'
Farrell gritted his teeth mutely, moving his hand away from the hilt and straightening up again.
'There will be no bloodshed here' Tristan spoke up. 'At least not by me or my men, and I've not come to fight nor waste any more time with you.' He spoke to Amaia now. 'Come here Amaia.'
Amaia hesitated. Farrell and Arlen watched her expectantly.
'Amaia?' Farrell uttered as she began to move closer to Tristan.
She turned her back on him, walking towards the prince.
'Amaia!' Farrell called after her, his voice breaking and heart tearing in his chest.
Beside him Arlen placed a firm hand on his shoulder.
The two exchanged a glance; then looked back at Amaia.
'We'll wait for you' Arlen called out to her as she moved away with the prince and soldiers that surrounded both of them. 'We'll be here!'
Farrell began to quiver as he watched Amaia walking away and out of sight. Once again being taken away from him.
'How…' he uttered when they had gone. 'How could she…. why…. I don't understand?'
'I don't like it either' Arlen said firmly turning back to him. 'You don't know what he's told her. You don't know what has happened between them in the years she's been gone from us.'
'How could she leave?' Farrell whispered, placing a hand over his eyes, shoulders racked with sobs. 'How….?'
'Farrell' his brother spoke harshly. 'I have every confidence that if we stay here……she *will* return to us.'
Farrell lowered his hand, staring through watery eyes to his brother.
'But why?' he mumbled.
'Because' Arlen smiled. 'I have faith.'

'So that was Amaia' William said folding his arms and leaning back against the wall. 'The woman we've been looking for, for nearly a year. Here she was.'
'Layla…. Why do you think she bore a false name?' Adam asked them.
'Who knows?' Arlen said beside Farrell, who sat nearby silently biting back his grief. 'I'm sure Tristan told her to stay hidden here.'
'Just think' Adam continued, 'because of that false name, you might never have found her.' He paused in thought. 'It was extremely lucky that you did' he spoke to the brothers.
'So, what do we do now?' William asked the both of them.
Arlen glanced to Farrell before answering.
'You've fulfilled your purpose William' Arlen spoke solemnly. 'You are free to go where you please now. We thank you for all you've done, and are sorry for your loss. Bill was a good man.'
William stared at Arlen hard for a moment, before straightening up and walking away in silence.

‘I suppose the same goes for me’ Adam said quietly when he had gone.
‘Almost’ Arlen said. ‘There is one last thing I want you to do. Return to the mountains to the rest of the army, and release them.’
‘I will.’
Adam rose from his seat, moving towards Arlen and grasping his forearm in farewell.
‘Goodbye Arlen’ Adam said.
‘Goodbye my friend’ Arlen replied sadly, holding tightly Adam’s arm.
Adam let go, glancing silently to Farrell and nodding to him briefly before turning on his heel and marching out after William.
‘I guess that leaves just the two of us then’ Farrell mumbled as the door swung shut.
‘It does’ Arlen said. ‘It does.’ He took a deep breath. ‘And now we wait….’

Chapter Sixty-Six
Mearah’s Fate

Tristan took the tray from the servant, jerking his head to indicate her to be dismissed, before turning back to Amaia.
He placed the tray on the table before her.
‘Do you want some tea?’
Amaia didn’t answer; she only stared off into nothingness with a vacant expression. Upon her lap sat a small grey-coloured, skinny dog. Markus was curled up into a tiny ball, happily deep in sleep.
Tristan sat opposite her on the large sofa, the low table between them, upon which sat the tray that carried the tea, which was being ignored. He had brought her back to his home after they had left the temple, the home she had spent twelve years of her life imprisoned in. She was back here now, but this time she was free to wander, and free to be spoken to.
‘Amaia?’ Tristan asked tenderly. ‘What's wrong?’
‘What will happen to me?’ Amaia asked the air. ‘Will I be hunted for the rest of my life?’
‘No. Not anymore’ Tristan told her without hesitation. ‘You are safe now.’
‘Why?’
‘Because the king is dead.’
Amaia slowly turned her head towards him.
‘Without the king’ Tristan said, ‘no one will be hunting the Weather Makers anymore.’
‘The king is dead?’ Amaia mumbled. ‘How do you know?’
‘Because I watched him die.’
Amaia’s eyes widened in shock.
‘What…?’

Tristan pulled open the tall double doors, stepping inside the hall and closing the doors quietly behind him.

Everything inside the vast hall was silent.
Tristan walked forwards, marching to the back of the hall towards the woman who lay on the soft bed that rested upon a stone slab. Behind her, tall windows reached from the ground, all way to the high ceiling, allowing her still body to always bask in the sunlight or moonlight.
Tristan approached the steps, walking slowly up them and towards the woman, coming to stand beside her.
He looked over her mournfully, fear and uncertainty stirring in his heart.
'Mother' he said. 'I wish you would wake. I wish you were like the way you were before…I've missed you so much over the years….'
He bent forwards, holding her head in his hands. He rested his forehead against hers, breathing slowly with his eyes closed.
He kissed her forehead, straightening up again and gazing down upon her.
In life, her hair had always been shorter, but over the years, it had grown long, like her nails had grown long. Now her hair spilled down the side of the stone slab on which she lay, pooling on the ground below her.
'I'm sorry mother' Tristan said to her sleeping profile. 'I'm sorry…'
Tristan reached into his pocket, pulling out a small knife.
He looked down at the queen, his mother, just one last time, before slitting her throat.
The blood seeped through the open wound, staining the white bed she lay on, and the white dress she wore.
She was still alive; the blood flowed fresh, but she did not wake.
Tristan watched as the blood ran down the stone slab, until it began to slow; and her skin began to pale.
The doors opened behind him, and Tristan whipped around.
'Father?'
The king strode through the hall towards him. Tristan noticed then blood running from a wound at his neck.
'What happened?'
The king did not answer his son as he stormed up the steps. He froze then when he saw the blood.
'Noooooo!' the king screamed, tearing forwards. 'Mearah!'
He stared down at his wife in shock and disbelief and fear, hands grasping the edge of the stone slab, before turning on his son, grabbing him by the front of his shirt and shoving him away.
'What have you done?!' he screamed at him. 'What have you done?!'
Tristan stared back in astonishment, unable to take his eyes away from his father's grief.
The king bawled hysterically over his wife, leaning over her, before quickly falling silent.
'Mearah' he whispered. 'My love…'
He lifted her in his arms then, moving down the steps away from the stone slab and towards the centre of the hall.
And then he began to spin, as if dancing with her, holding her dead body in his arms, her long hair flowing around her.
Suddenly the king collapsed, falling to his knees and holding his wife close.
'My love…' the king whispered in her ear, over and over again. 'My love…'

He lay her down on the cold stone floor, rising to his feet and facing his son.
The king drew a sword from his belt, and Tristan stepped back uncertainly. But instead of attacking him, the king turned the sword on his self, driving it straight through his own navel, and falling beside his wife.
He moaned in pain, gritting his teeth as he raised his head up to glare at his son as he died.
Tristan watched without emotion as his father jerked the sword out of him.
He lay beside his wife now, reaching out to touch her one last time.
'I will see you soon my love….' the king whispered, 'Mearah…'
The prince stared down at what had just happened, broken from his trance only when he noticed another figure in the room with him.
He was not alone in the hall as he had first believed.
Tristan turned to the figure on the floor, sitting hunched against the wall and nursing his injures.
'You…'

'I tried to make him see reason' Tristan said mournfully. 'I tried…when my father received a raven sent by my brother, telling him of a Weather Maker named Annabel who was especially powerful; he began to obsess over her……. I tried to speak to him. I tried to make him stop. But he wouldn't listen…and after a time' he went on, 'I realised the only thing I could do, was to get rid of *her*.' He drew a steady breath. 'Without her, there would be no reason for him to kidnap the Weather Makers, but I never realised what he would do once he found her, I never really thought about it.' He leant forward, brow furrowed and hand over his mouth in thought. 'I shouldn't have been surprised. I should have known he would do it…. he truly loved with all his heart and soul……but…I couldn't continue to let him do what he did, not if there was something I could do to stop it. He stole the Weather Makers, believing they could save my mother…. he had no reason to believe this, his grief drove him mad, and it was the only hope he could grasp onto. My mother was a Weather Maker, so he thought that only other Weather Makers could save her.' He shook his head. 'I should have done it sooner……but I didn't have the courage.'
'How could you kill your own mother?' Amaia asked him weakly, feeling sick to her stomach. 'That makes you as bad as *he* was.'
'I was driven to it' Tristan replied. 'Because the king…my father……. he killed my son…your brother Alan.'

Tristan marched briskly down the corridor, walking with his head down but eyes up. He turned towards the double doors and entered the great hall beyond.
Inside he faltered, seeing his father standing with his back to him, facing the queen who lay forever still on her bed at the end of the hall, and his son nearby, flanked by two soldiers.
Tristan shifted on the spot, glancing from his son to his father's back.
'Father' he nodded.
He looked again at Alan, who stared back at him nervously.
At first the king did not address his son, but stared, for the longest time at the sleeping profile of the queen, his wife.

'She's so beautiful' he spoke at last. 'Is she not?'
'She is' Tristan replied uncertainly.
'And you know there is nothing I wouldn't do for her.'
'I know' Tristan said.
'I would gladly kill for her, would gladly go to the ends of the earth…even rip out my own heart for her……if it would bring her back…. you know that…don't you?'
'Yes' Tristan answered.
'You stole a Weather Maker from my prison' he said to him. 'Didn't you.'
Tristan didn't answer, he didn't move, only forced himself to take deep and calming breaths, as panic began to slowly sink its claws into him. He glanced now with fear towards his own son. Alan continued to watch him unspoken.
'I want you to tell me where she is' the king spoke dangerously. 'I want her returned to me.'
'Father.' Tristan spoke loudly to the king. 'Enough of this! Don't you see you've caused enough suffering? And for what?! You haven't been able to save her, you haven't even come close! Please!' he cried. 'Stop this madness. Do you want this' he indicated to a figure sat hunched at the edge of the hall, 'to be your legacy?!'
The figure raised his head, seeing the scene before him through his one good eye. Through his left eye, he was blind, and had bled profusely where the knife had been driven through. He had deep wounds all over his body where he had been stabbed over and over again, but none of the wounds were meant to be fatal, only to cause pain.
'Father' Tristan spoke quietly now. 'I am begging you. Please stop this madness.'
'Bring the Weather Maker back to me' the king ordered.
Tristan clenched his jaw.
'Bring…' the king said, 'the Weather maker…back to me.'
'No.'
At last, the king turned to face his son, and Tristan saw with a jolt in his heart, that he held a loaded crossbow in his hands.
'Bring the Weather Maker back to me' the king repeated.
Tristan didn't move, he only stared. Tears began to gleam in his eyes.
The king pointed the crossbow at Alan and fired.
The soldiers each grasped Alan by the arm as he fell back, the bolt from the crossbow sticking out of his shoulder.
Alan groaned in pain, glaring at Tristan.
'Father…' he spoke through gritted teeth. 'Help me.'
'I can't' Tristan whispered back, no trusting his voice. 'Amaia….'
Alan hung his head in grief, realising and accepting the inevitable.
'Father….'
His lifted his head again, but there was no fear in his eyes this time.
'I would do anything for my sister.'
'I know you would Alan' Tristan whispered back, tears running down his cheeks. 'As would I.'
Alan gasped, as another bolt went into him, this time piercing his chest.
Tristan bit back a sob, gritting his teeth as his whole body began to tremble.
He watched as another bolt hit him again, flinching as this time it pierced his lung.

Tristan watched as Alan sunk to his knees, still held by his arms by the soldiers either side as a fourth bolt hit him.
The soldiers released him, and Alan fell to his side, dead.

'Alan was willing to die for you' Tristan told her as he cried, 'as I was willing to allow him to die…for you.....I wouldn't have told him where you were, not even if he tried to kill me too.'
'But why did he do that?' Amaia asked quietly.
'Because I took you from the prison. I rescued you. I took you away from *him*.'
'Who was that woman?' Amaia asked him. 'The one I saw when leaving that prison. She went into the cell I just left…...she had green hair too.'
'I kidnapped her' Tristan replied casually. 'I had to find someone to take your place in that prison. I was hoping he wouldn't notice….so caught up in his grief as he was.' His eyes became distant. 'She was just a passer-by I found who looked enough like you…I thought it would work…but he punished me for it….and my son.'
'Why was her hair green like mine?'
'I dyed it.'
Amaia furrowed her brow at him, tilting her head slightly.
'What happened to her?'
'I don't know.'
'What do you think *might* have happened to her?'
'Most likely?' Tristan said. 'Its most likely she's dead now.'
Amaia's heart sunk in her chest as she stared at Tristan in disbelief.
'How could you do such a thing?'
'To protect you' Tristan spoke more firmly than he intended, leaning forwards in his seat. 'And for that I would do *anything*.'
'Anything?' Amaia repeated. 'Even letting innocent people die?'
'Yes.'
'Then that makes you no better than the king.'
Something happened in Tristan's expression at that. His eye twitched, and he opened his mouth as if to speak, but in the end said nothing.
Amaia rose, and walked away from him.
'Where are you going?' Tristan asked uncertainly.
'You said that you would never keep me imprisoned again' Amaia said. 'That if I wanted to leave…you wouldn't stop me' she turned back to him. 'You said that, didn't you?'
'You're going back to Farrell?!' Tristan asked incredulous. 'He is *not* your father.'
'I grew up with him' Amaia answered calmly. 'He is as good as.'

She took a horse, and rode the long distance all the way back the way she had come, alone this time. She headed back to the temple, skipping lightly through the rooms, looking for one of them.

She saw Arlen first, sitting beneath the statue of the god Ezla, a depiction of a man growing out of stone, with a bare chest and sharp claws.
Arlen raised his head suddenly as if sensing her, looking around.
Seeing Amaia standing there, his expression broke into a wide grin.
Amaia approached him nervously as Arlen rose to his feet.
'Amaia' he sighed with relief. 'I knew you'd come back.'
'I had to' Amaia said. 'Tristan…he…' she drew a deep breath. 'He let bad things happen, innocent people….'
'Hey' Arlen smiled stepping towards her, and grasping her lightly by the shoulders. 'It's ok.'
Amaia bowed her head. Her hands went to the hood that covered her hair; she lowered it, and faced him again. For the first time, she revealed her light green hair to Arlen.
Arlen blinked curiously at the sight. But instead of questioning it, he simply smiled.
'It's good to have you back' he said.

Chapter Sixty-Seven
Ending

'Amaia' Farrell said to her when the two of them were alone.
'Yes?'
'Why is your hair green?'
'Oh.' Her hand went to her hair unconsciously as she spoke. 'I've changed much over the years' she answered vaguely. 'My powers…. they've made me this way. I've…...been reincarnated.'
'You died?'
'It wasn't meant to happen' Amaia told him. 'When I was younger, mother…. Ramana…made me hide my powers. You might not have known this, but she too was a Weather Maker.'
'Yes' Farrell spoke slowly, turning his head away. 'I had my suspicions, after I began searching for you, after I first heard of the word *Weather Maker*, I would remember her back when she was alive. Things happened….' He scratched his itchy palms. 'You can do magic then?'
'Yes' Amaia said quietly. 'My affinity…. it's frost. Ramana's was wind.' Her heart jolted then as she remembered White Feather. *He taught me so much* she thought sadly. *I still can't believe he's gone*.
'I would love to see it' Farrell said. 'If you don't mind. If it's ok with you.'
Amaia hesitated, chewing her lip. But she knew it was safe for her now, with the king dead. She was no longer hunted.
Amaia leant back; placing her hand into the water of the fountain behind them.
The water instantly began to cool, and then freeze. Ice formed from where she touched the water, trapping her hand there, and growing outwards. The very air around them also began to cool, and snowflakes fell from the air above.

After a few seconds, Amaia withdrew her hand from the pool, jerking back sharply to break the ice and brushing away the shards that remained stuck to her skin.
'This power' Farrell spoke sadly as the snowflakes that had gathered around them began to melt, 'it's the reason the king wanted you.'
'Yes' Amaia mumbled. 'He believed that Weather Makers had the power to save his wife. She was also a Weather Maker. She fell into a coma.' Amaia's hand reached up to her face, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. 'I don't know what was wrong with her, and I suppose none of the other Weather Makers that came before me knew either.' Her eyes grew distant, grew sad. 'They're both dead now' she mumbled, 'the king and queen.'
'Yes' Farrell said under his breath. 'I knew the king at least was dead.'
'What happens now?' Amaia asked him. 'Do we go home?'
'Home?' Farrell tensed at the word, becoming suddenly uncertain. 'I don't have a home, not anymore. I've been on the road for so long…' he faltered then, as a dark thought suddenly struck him. 'Maybe' he spoke reluctantly, 'it's better if you stay with Tristan. He could give you the life you deserve…I don't even have a place to live anymore.'
'No' Amaia shook her head firmly. 'I grew up with you, and here is where I wish to stay.'
Farrell moved closer towards her, embracing her. Amaia held him back, resting her cheek on his shoulder, sighing happily.
'I love you Amaia' Farrell said to her. 'You mean the world to me.'
She held him tighter, mumbling into his shoulder.
'I love you too.'

That evening, Amaia, Farrell and Arlen found a table at an inn where they sat down together to eat, nestled in their own little corner, away from the other tables, Amaia sat between Arlen and Farrell, smiling at each of them.
'This is nice' she said happily. 'It's like we're a real family.'
'We *are* a real family' Arlen told her firmly.
'Of course we are' she beamed at him. 'I'm just…I'm just so happy.' She reached out to Farrell and Arlen either side of her on the bench, pulling them both close in a hug. 'These have been the happiest days for me. I know I made the right decision coming back. I'm just…so so happy.'
She began to laugh then, seemingly for no particular reason.
'We're glad you're so easily amused' Arlen chuckled.
'Amused is not the right word' Amaia frowned at him, letting them both go again. 'I've just…it's been such a long journey I've endured. I feel it's finally come to its end.'
'A happy end?' Farrell asked her.
'A happy end' she repeated, turning and smiling at him.
They all looked at each other, and together raised their tankards in a toast.
'To happy endings?' Arlen said.
'To happy endings' Farrell and Amaia echoed.
They all drank deeply then, even Amaia who was a match for either man drank heavily.
She placed the tankard down heavily, hand going to her lips as she hiccupped.

‘So’ Farrell asked, staring at his own tankard before him, ‘the question remains. Where should we go from here?’
Arlen and Amaia glanced up at him uncertainly.
‘I think we should all stick together’ Arlen said, ‘if that’s ok with everyone. I feel we have spent far too long apart. We’ve each got a lot of lost time to make up for. And after all…I think family should stay together.’
‘I think that’s a great idea’ Amaia beamed.
‘But where should we go?’ Farrell asked. ‘What should we do?’
‘Well, we could go anywhere’ Amaia thought aloud, ‘anywhere at all, and do whatever we want.’
‘Did you have any particular place in mind?’ Arlen asked her.
‘I know, let’s go everywhere!’
Arlen threw his head back in laughter.
‘I'm serious’ Amaia frowned furiously. ‘I've stayed too long rooted to one place or another, too long stuck where I didn’t want to be. Unless I have a good reason to stay, then I want to move on, perhaps see the world.’
Arlen and Farrell looked to one another. Arlen’s eyes glinted; his smile stretched into a wide grin.
‘Well…’ Arlen said, ‘wherever the wind might take us, from now on, I want us to enjoy every step.’
He lifted his tankard again to toast.
‘To the future’ he said.
‘To the future’ Amaia and Farrell mimicked.

That night, they all slept at the inn in separate rooms, Amaia woke early, feeling happy, feeling excited. She couldn’t sleep, so rose, and went to wander alone, at long last in her life feeling safe to do so.
It was still quiet in the streets of the town they had come to, and Amaia ambled between the houses, breathing in the fresh morning air, still cool from the night.
She came to a fountain, behind which grew a beautiful tree, with little flowers blooming from the tips of every branch.
Amaia paused here for a moment, picking up a handful of the fallen petals and blowing them away across the water in the fountain. They landed lightly, the pink petals floating gently on the surface.
A flurry of petals fell over her head then, and she glanced up, seeing a curious thing. A man in the tree hanging upside-down was watching her. He offered her a tiny flower picked from the tree, and she took it from him tentatively.
He climbed down from the tree, turning upright with fluid smooth motions, as at home in the tree as a spider in its web. He landed lightly before her, straightening up and facing her.
‘Such skill it must take to hang in the tree like that’ Amaia told him.
‘I was an assassin’ he said, ‘such skills were expected of me. But that is a dark past that is far behind me. I wish for a better future, a brighter and happier future.’ He offered her another

flower, not one from the tree, but a secret one hidden up his sleeve, a beautiful white, trumpet-shaped flower, which he offered to her.
'Dare I ask' he began, 'the lady her name?'
'Amaia' she breathed.
He smiled kindly.
'Mine is Carl.'

A year passes

'You want to take her away from me?' Farrell hissed under his breath.
'No no' Carl said defensively. 'It's not like that. I love her, and I want to spend the rest of my life with her.'
'How do I know you're good enough for her?'
'I promise' Carl said, placing his hand upon his heart, 'in the name of each of the seven gods that I will be good to her, always…'
Farrell stepped back, frowning in thought.
'Please' Carl said. 'I never knew how dead I was until I met her.'
'Farrell' came Arlen's voice from behind him. 'Will you stop tormenting the poor man?'
Farrell turned to him. 'You shouldn't be sneaking up behind me like that.'
'Oh please' Arlen smirked, uncrossing his arms and stepping forward. 'Amaia means as much to me as she does to you, and I believe he will treat her well' he said nodding towards Carl. 'I know…I can see in his heart that he truly loves her.'
Farrell gritted his teeth then as he considered Carl before him.

Farrell walked down the street, holding Amaia's hand in his. Together they moved slowly towards Carl who waited for them at the end of the street.
They stopped when they reached him, letting go of each other.
'Thank you for everything' Amaia said to Farrell, glowing with joy. She leant forward and kissed his cheek, turning then to Arlen who had followed behind them and giving him a firm hug. 'Both of you' she said.
'I trust you will take good care of her' Farrell spoke firmly to Carl.
'To the best of my abilities' Carl bowed low.
'Goodbye Amaia' Arlen said, wiping a tear from her cheek and holding back his own. 'We will still see each other again, won't we?'
'I'll visit you' Amaia told him. 'Whenever I can.'
'I know you will.'
Amaia stepped back from him, turning now towards Carl and taking his hand.
Farrell and Arlen watched as Amaia and Carl walked away together, down the street and towards the two waiting horses. They both mounted them; Amaia pulled her mare around to face Farrell and Arlen, who waved to her. She smiled and waved back, one last time, before sending her horse around to follow after Carl's.
The two headed away from the town and to his new home, a long way away.

‘I think this counts as a happily ever after’ Arlen grinned, lowering his hand.
Beside him Farrell looked sullen.
‘Oh cheer up’ Arlen nudged him roughly. ‘Come on’ he said putting his arm around Farrell’s shoulders and walking with him. ‘Let’s go and have a drink to celebrate a happy ending.’

Tristan sat alone in the dark of his home, staring at the empty bottles piled up on the table before him. He had lost a lot of weight over the months that had passed. Once healthy and fit and handsome, now he looked gaunt and skeletal, with pale skin and sunken eyes.
He sat miserably where he was with eyes out of focus; the same memory, whether he was sleeping or awake, would cycle over and over again in his mind.
He was leaning over Olithia, holding her hand in his and shaking her.
‘Olithia! Olithia stay with me.’
‘I'm sorry’ the midwife told him. ‘She’s gone.’
‘And the baby?’
‘Still born.’
Tristan rose to his feet, letting go of his wife’s hand and walking away.

A tear shimmered in his eye, and ran down his cheek silently.
Tristan stared at the bottles, thinking the same thoughts over and over; until at last a new thought struck him, as he remembered someone he had almost forgotten.
‘Amaia…’
He rose to his feet and left the room behind him.

Chapter Sixty-Eight
The Man behind the Mask

Many months passed, and on this night, in the town that Amaia now called home, there was a great celebration.
‘This is all so beautiful!’ Amaia cooed, hanging onto Carl’s arm and squeezing him. ‘Where should we go first?’
‘It doesn’t matter’ Carl squeezed her back. ‘It’s all so wonderful, the whole town is celebrating. No matter where we go, we’ll see things worth seeing.’
All around them people were laughing and drinking and dancing and having fun. Amaia watched as a small group played music, on violins and drums and lutes, as others dressed in the most striking and flamboyant clothes danced around them. And people flocked the streets now, as many coming out of the inns and drinking houses as went in.
‘Let’s go to the town centre’ Amaia beamed, casting her head back as fireworks danced in the sky above them, their glowing lights exploding in bright flashing colours before dissipating

and fading away. So beautiful, yet so brief. 'I hear there is a masquerade happening there' Amaia went on, facing Carl again.
'How mysterious' Carl said, raising an eyebrow at her seductively.
'How fun!' Amaia added.
She held his face tenderly, kissing him deeply, before grabbing him by the hand and moving off, dragging him after her.
The closer they drew towards the town centre, the more figures they saw who hid behind masks. First there were few; then there were many. As they reached the centre, nearly everyone around them wore a mask.
Carl bought one for each of them from a stall selling them nearby. The masks were the most beautiful and ornate designs. Colours of burnished gold and purples and greens and blues, some with great plumes at their head.
They danced together under the firelight of the touches that burned all around them, smiling at each other from behind their masks as they moved through the crowd of dancing couples.
'I love you so much' Amaia said to him from behind her mask when the melody ended.
'I love you more' Carl gleamed back; eyes shining as the fireworks whistled in the night.
They removed their masks for a moment so that they could reach a kiss, locked in each other's arms as the lights exploded above their heads.
Carl cast his head up as the sparks crackled over the town. He noticed then in the crowd dancing around them, a single figure that stood alone, standing still and facing them, wearing a white mask with black eyes and a great crest of black feathers at the head. It was clear by the clothes and build that the figure was male.
Seeing he had been spotted by the figures that he watched, he extended a hand silently.
'I think he wants a dance' Carl said to Amaia, still holding her in his arms. She had noticed the figure also. 'Go on' he smiled at her. 'I'll wait.'
'Are you sure?' she asked him tentatively.
'Go on' he repeated. 'I don't mind.'
Amaia kissed him on the lips one last time, before gliding away from him and towards the mysterious figure. She went to replace her mask, but the stranger placed his hand gently on hers to stop her.
'Such beauty should not be hidden' he spoke.
Amaia lowered the mask again, instead tying it to her side and leaving it to hang there.
The strange figure took her hand in his, and placed his other hand around her waist.
They began to dance.
Moving in the firelight, they never took their eyes off one other as they danced amongst the crowd.
For a moment Amaia felt safe, felt comfortable, even though she didn't know who hide behind the mask.
After a time, before the music had stopped, the figure slowed gradually, letting go of her hand and withdrawing his other from her waist.
'I was hoping to see you again' the figure said lifting a hand to his mask, his tone was sincere. 'I knew I'd find you here' the figure spoke as he removed the mask from his face.
Amaia took a step away from him as he revealed his face.
'I've missed you. My daughter.'

Amaia balled her fists, puffing her chest out.
‘Are you trying to hide from me?’ she glowered. ‘Are you trying to trick me?’ she gritted her teeth. ‘I am not your daughter. Farrell is my father.’
‘You are Amaia’ Tristan replied quickly. ‘You are my daughter.’
Amaia didn’t answer, only pursed her lips in anger.
‘I have…. some bad news’ Tristan said bowing his head. ‘Your mother is dead.’
‘She’s not my mother’ Amaia said curtly. ‘And I'm very sorry.’
Amaia made to leave, but Tristan grabbed her wrist.
‘I want you to come home’ he spoke firmly to her.
‘Let go of me’ Amaia struggled. ‘I already have a home.’
‘It’s not where you belong’ Tristan spoke harshly, tightening his grip.
‘Let go! You're hurting me!’ but her cries were barely heard over the noise of the celebration around them, and the people were too distracted, too drunk and too happy to even notice that something was wrong.
‘I won’t go!’ Amaia spat stubbornly. ‘I won’t!’
‘If you won’t come willingly, then I will take you by force.’
‘LET GO!’
She tried to scream, but her cries were cut short when he clamped a damp rag over her mouth, holding her tight.
Amaia couldn’t hold her breath for long, and was forced to breath in the fumes, collapsing as she fell unconscious.
Tristan caught her and swung her over his shoulder, striding away from the dancing figures around them and out of town. None spared him a second glance.
He headed towards a waiting carriage parked just outside the town, and placed her carefully inside.
‘Home’ he said to the driver. ‘And be quick.’
Back at the masquerade, Carl searched for her.
He searched and searched, but he could not find her.

The next day

Amaia lifted her head to the sky, feeling the suns warm glow upon her face, drying the tears that ran down her cheek.
The garden around her was just as she remembered it, and nothing had changed since the last time she was here. It was the garden she had spent twelve years of her life overlooking, in the manor that White Feather had first found her in. If Amaia were to wander its grounds, she would find the plaque, her own grave, where she had fallen from the tower, all that time ago.
She sat on a bench now, looking around her. It was a beautiful place, but it felt as dead to her now as it did before.
‘I grew up with Farrell’ Amaia grumbled miserably at him, ‘…and Ramana…. for many years they gave me a good life…a happy childhood……you’ve given me only a prison of loneliness…. for twelve years…’

Tristan turned to face her; he had been picking the peaches from the tree that grew nearby. Now he stared at the back of her head, her hair matching the light green leaves of the bush that stood between them.
'I only did that to protect you' Tristan snapped harshly back. 'I was afraid to visit you in fear of my father finding out.'
'You've hurt people' Amaia added.
'To protect. You!'
Tristan's chest rose and fell sharply now as he breathed heavily, anger coursing through him.
'It's ok' he said, taking a slow and steady breath, placing on the ground the basket of peaches he held. 'Everything is as it should be. My father is dead, and you are here with me.'
'I would rather be dead than be with you' Amaia mumbled.
'How could you say such a thing?' Tristan asked her, feeling wounded.
She didn't answer.
'Amaia?'
He walked slowly around the bush to see her, gasping in shock when he saw Amaia fully.
She was deathly pale. The knife she had used to slit both her wrists lay now on her lap smeared in blood.
Tristan's hand went to his side, but instead of finding the knife he had carried, he found only an empty hilt.
She had stolen it from him.
He rushed up to her, holding her his arms. Her head lolled to the side as he grasped her desperately, but it was already far too late. She was already lost.
Her body vanished then, disappearing into balls of white light that drifted upwards in the breeze, as Tristan arms fell through thin air.
He rose, calling after her as the sparks lifted ever higher, growing smaller now than could be seen.
'I will find you!' he cried. 'I won't let you go!'
His only reply was the howling of the wind, dancing the leaves of the trees around him, and the endless silence that followed.

Amaia woke on the open plains, somewhere far away, her hair now red like blood. She wandered alone for days after that, having lost all her memory of her past, of Tristan, Farrell, Arlen and Carl, even Ramana. And without White Feather there to guide her, she became lost, and spiralled into a pit of misery, though she couldn't understand why.
Back at her old home, Carl had set out to find her. The first place he could think of looking for her, was back where Farrell and Arlen lived, in a town far away.
When he completed the long journey on horseback and entered the town, he found Farrell and Arlen at the blacksmiths where they worked together.
'Farrell, Arlen' Carl said as he approached them. 'I'm afraid I've got some back news.'

'This is all Tristan's doing' Arlen sneered as they all sat around a table a short while later.
'Tristan?' Carl spoke the name. 'Who is Tristan?'

Farrell and Arlen glanced at each other.
Farrell heaved a heavy sigh, running a hand wearily down his face.
'Arlen' he grumbled. 'Why don't you explain?'
'Well,' Arlen said turning to Carl. 'It's a *very* long story. Where do I begin?' he asked himself. Arlen scratched his chin as he thought; then opened his mouth to speak. 'You know how Amaia is different from others?' he said to Carl.
'You mean her powers?'
'Yes.' Arlen lowered his eyes. 'I think that is the best place to begin the story. It started a very long time ago, with her mother Ramana. It started before Amaia was even born.'

Chapter Sixty-Nine
Mothers and Fathers

Carl walked the world now with a wider heart, and a different perspective on everything he saw. He helped Farrell and Arlen search for Amaia, finding her weeks later in a town far from their home.
'Amaia' Carl said to her. 'What happened to your hair?'
'Who are you?' she replied to him. 'And why do you call me that?'
'It's your name' Carl replied hurt, 'and you know who I am.'
'Carl' Arlen said beside him, placing a hand upon his shoulder. 'There is one last thing we forgot to tell you.'

'Reincarnation?' Carl repeated. He glanced across the courtyard in which they sat, gazing towards Farrell and Amaia who spoke quietly together on the other side.
'Yes' Arlen said. 'It's one of her powers. If she dies, she is reincarnated and looks slightly different. When she was very young, she had black hair, like her mother. But…something happened after she was taken from us, and she died, and when she woke again…. well…. that's where the green hair came from.'
'But why green?'
'She said she fell from a tower' Arlen explained, 'and into a bush. The green from the leaves was absorbed in her magic as she was reincarnated…. or something like that.'
'So' Carl said thoughtfully. 'Who exactly is her father?'
'I don't know' Arlen replied sadly. 'In truth. It could be me….' he glanced up, 'it could be Farrell……hell it might even be Tristan.'
'You?' Carl frowned. 'How might you be the father?'
'I uh…' Arlen began. 'Farrell's wife…. Ramana…. before she married him, we were…...well……. we were….'
'You were lovers?'
Arlen shrugged. 'I convinced her to marry Farrell because I believed he could give her a better life than I could.'
'And?'

‘Well…’ Arlen went on. ‘The night before she was to marry Farrell…. we…...well…’
Carl looked away.
‘It must have been difficult for you’ he said. ‘Letting go of her I mean.’
‘I loved Ramana with all my heart’ Arlen told him. ‘I still do. Even today I think of her……I know I shouldn’t be sad because I have Amaia. We’ve found her at last after all those years, and she has a happy life now…with you…’ he glanced towards Carl. ‘The king is dead, and she is no longer being hunted…. I’m happy for her.’
‘But you still miss Ramana’ Carl finished.
‘Yes’ Arlen bowed his head. ‘I shouldn’t be sad I know. I know she wouldn’t want me to be sad, I have Amaia after all…. but even after all this time…...’ he drew a shuddering breath, holding back his sobs. ‘I miss her so much…. more than I ever thought possible…even after all this time’ he whispered. Arlen turned to Carl with tears in his eyes. ‘If you lost Amaia forever……. how would you feel?’
Carl stared back at him for a moment, before looking away towards Amaia. ‘My world would crumble’ he muttered back.
Arlen looked towards Amaia also.
‘She is the last thing I have left of Ramana’ Arlen mumbled.
‘So…’ Carl began slowly, ‘where does Tristan come into this? Did he love Ramana once?’
‘No’ Arlen shook his head. ‘He believes Amaia is his daughter by his own wife. I believe her name’s Olithia. I've never met her, Amaia…. didn’t like her…or so she told me.’
‘So, her mother could be one of two women’ Carl clarified. ‘Her father could be one of three men.’
‘Yes’ Arlen said quietly.
The two sat together silently, watching Farrell and Amaia talk.

Chapter Seventy
A Familiar Face

They spent the next few weeks after that teaching Amaia, helping her re-learn everything she had forgotten of her past. But she wasn’t the same as she had been before. It was as if she had lost a piece of her, a piece they could not find nor replace.
‘I feel like there is a void inside me’ Amaia said one day. ‘There is something missing in my life, something dear to me, something I had before…. but for the life of me I cannot remember what it is.’
Carl had tried to comfort her, but she was beyond even his reach. She was not the same anymore, and began to spiral into depression, despite all their exhaustive efforts.
Nothing worked.

One evening, Farrell invited her to his home. The two of them sat alone at the table in the dining room, the fire crackling happily warmed up the room around them. Farrell brought Amaia her food; then sat at the other side of the table with his own, watching Amaia closely.

‘Amaia?’ he said after a time when she hadn’t moved.
Amaia stared in silence down at her plate, her food untouched.
‘What's wrong?’ Farrell asked her.
‘I feel an absence beside me’ she answered, ‘a presence I lost and a name I cannot remember.’ She furrowed her brow, teeth gritted in frustration. ‘*Who is it*?’
She bowed her head, her long red hair falling over her face.
‘You know what I am’ she said to Farrell. ‘I am a Weather Maker.’
‘Yes’ Farrell replied uncertainly. ‘Yes I know.’
‘A Weather Maker can only be reincarnated a certain number of times’ Amaia went on. ‘I am on my last life.’
Farrell raised his head, but she said no more.
He looked down at his plate.
‘Could you get me some wine?’ Amaia asked him.
‘Yes’ Farrell faltered. ‘Yes of course.’
He rose from his seat, turning his back to her as he went to the drinks cabinet. Amaia watched in silence as he poured them both a goblet.
He brought hers over to her, placing it before her.
‘And can I have a napkin?’ she asked of him.
When Farrell turned away to oblige, Amaia pulled a tiny vial from her sleeve, tipping the contents into her goblet, before returning the vial again to her sleeve.
Farrell returned with the napkin. He held it out to her in his crippled hand.
‘I don’t want it’ Amaia said shortly, not looking at him.
Farrell lowered his hand, staring at her uncertainly.
He moved slowly away, returning to his seat and sitting, watching her closely.
Amaia began to eat. Farrell followed suit.
They ate in silence for a time, until Amaia at last spoke.
‘Where is uncle?’
‘Arlen is…at home probably.’
‘And Carl?’
‘He’s…. probably at home too.’
Amaia took another sip from her goblet.
‘Will you tell them….’ she hesitated. ‘Tell them I am grateful for everything they have done, and I'm grateful for everything *you* have done’ she said to him. ‘I wish I could repay your kindness.’
‘What do you mean?’
‘I'm sorry I couldn’t be what you wanted me to be’ Amaia replied miserably.
She leant forward on the table, head in her hands, becoming still.
‘Amaia?’ Farrell asked her, worry laced his voice. ‘What’s wrong?’
The fire from the candles upon the table flickered slightly, through the window beside them the sky was dark, and nothing could be seen outside. Rain pattered gently on the window panes, the only sound now in the room besides the sound from the burning hearth.
Amaia’s elbow slipped and she fell from her chair. Farrell rose so fast his chair fell back as he rushed over to her.
‘Amaia! Amaia what's wrong?’

She was unresponsive, lethargic. He noticed then a tiny vial on the floor that had fallen from her sleeve. Uncorking it and sniffing it, he rose swiftly and went to the table where she had sat, picking up her goblet and smelling it too.
'Poison.'
He turned to her in realisation as she lay half on the carpet, half on the wooden floor, the flickering light from the hearth dancing on her still profile.
'You poisoned yourself' he moaned in shock and disbelief. 'How could you…. why…?'
'My mother' Amaia whispered weakly. 'Ramana……...I will see her again……in the afterlife……...' She sighed. 'There is no place for me in this world…'
'No!' Farrell screamed picking her up and cradling her in his arms. 'No Amaia! You can't do this to me! I can't lose you again!'
'Move back!' came a sudden unfamiliar voice.
Farrell was so shocked by the presence of the strange figure that he did not resist as the figure knelt and took Amaia in his arm away from him.
He was lean, young in appearance and slim-faced with almost feminine features. His slick black hair was handsome, and a long fringe hung low over his face. There was a severe injury in his left eye, and scars all over his body. He had been tortured.
He bent over Amaia, placing his mouth over hers.
The stranger breathed inwards deeply. As Farrell watched, the figure's body began to pale to a sickening shade; black cracks appeared all over his skin. But he still did not release Amaia.

Amaia was in a strange place then, a place that felt incomplete, yet safe. She walked forwards, but saw nothing around her.
And then she heard a voice.
'I like your hair like that.'
Amaia turned towards the voice. She gasped in shock at the figure she saw, hands over her mouth.
'Is that really you?'
She lowered her shaking hands, eyes wide with astonishment as she uttered a word.
'Mother…?'
Ramana stepped towards her, smiling widely. Beautiful she was, wearing her red dress that ran across her shoulders, with her long black hair cascading down her body.
She was just as Amaia had once known.
'I remember' Amaia spoke in a trembling voice. 'I remember you; I remember everything that happened.'
'And what about me?' another figure said, appearing by her side.
Amaia turned to the male figure now, staring in surprise.
'Alan?'
Alan grinned, eyes warm and gentle.
'Hello sister.'
The scene around them changed suddenly. Amaia felt a strong wind about her, felt a tightness in her stomach. Then everything calmed.

When she opened her eyes next, she saw they stood in a forest, like the one Amaia had so often wandered through with Ramana when she was a child.
'What is this place?' Amaia asked. 'It looks like home.'
'It is' Ramana beamed. 'You see that?' she pointed towards one of the trees. 'That's the tree house I built for you and Gracie.'
'Tree pirates' Amaia smiled, a tear running down her cheek. 'I remember.'
Amaia noticed suddenly, a little green bird walking by their feet, a long beaked creature, chirping and tilting its head up at them.
Amaia looked back at Ramana and Alan. 'Why are we here?'
'You brought us here' Ramana said. 'You must have been thinking about this place. It is your home after all.'
'I like this place' Alan spoke. 'It's peaceful…. quiet…'
Amaia glanced at him. 'I'm sorry about what happened to you' she said, tears streaming down her face now. 'I'm sorry…'
'Hey' Alan smiled kindly. 'I chose this……to protect you.'
'I never wanted anyone to die for me.'
'My sweet daughter' Ramana said, gliding towards her, caressing her cheek with a hand. 'My precious treasure.'
'Oh mother' Amaia whispered, sobbing now. 'All this time…. I've missed you so much…...it hurts…'
'I know' Ramana replied sadly. 'But I'm sorry.'
'For what?'
'There is no place for you here' Ramana told her. 'At least not yet.'
Ramana embraced her one last time, before pulled back. She turned and walked away.
'Goodbye my dear sister' Alan nodded to her, 'it was good to see you one last time' he said, before turning to follow Ramana.
'Wait!' Amaia called after them. 'Just tell me one thing!'
The two paused to glance back to her.
'Who is my real father?' Amaia asked.
Ramana and Alan shared a look.
'It doesn't matter anymore' Ramana answered. 'Things are the way they should be.'
Amaia watched as they walked away from her, their profiles glowed white for an instant, before fading away.
Amaia felt a strange sensation in her stomach, as if she was being suddenly lifted. And then everything went black.

White Feather pulled away from her, hunching over and coughing hysterically. His body shook violently as he leant back against the wall behind him, gasping; his skin pale and beaded with sweat. The magic he had used to draw out the poison from her had been a great drain on him.
He lay back breathing heavily and watching Amaia. She began to stir.
Farrell moved close to her again, leaning over her.
'Amaia?' he spoke tentatively.

Amaia opened her eyes, sitting up to face him now.
'Father?'
She looked around then, gasping at the sight of him.
'White Feather?!'
She crawled over to him, hands running all over his body in horror as she saw all his old wounds that were now only scars. She saw his left eye, horribly disfigured. He was completely blind in this eye.
'What happened to you?' she whispered in shock. 'I thought you were dead. Tristan told me you were dead.'
White Feather smiled weakly at her, the colour slowly coming back to him as his body fought the poison he had consumed. He drew a steady breath, before speaking to her.
'Tristan lied.'

'You're right' the king said at length. 'It's not the girl I should pay my attentions to. It's you.'
He grabbed the knife from the soldier, and in a few strides was upon White Feather. He swung his fist, knocking the fairy onto his back. The king sat on his chest, using his knees to pin down the fairy's arms, he held White Feather's throat with one hand, the other he raised the knife. White Feather was too weak to fight back or attempt to free himself.
'Coward, am I?' the king said in a deadly whisper.
The king brought the knife closer to White Feather's face, forcing the point through his left eye.
White Feather began to scream.
Amaia had been taken away after that, after being forced to witness all the horrible things the king had done to him, and the suffering he was forced to endure. The king had not gotten what he wanted; Amaia did not know how to help the queen.
The king had stormed out in fury after that. White Feather was left alone in that hall with the sleeping queen, thanking the gods the king had forgotten about him, and praying to them to be allowed to escape, so that he could return to Amaia once more.
He stayed here for long while, weak from hunger, in pain and in constant fear of what might happen next.
Eventually, sometime later as his eye began to slowly heal, he saw Tristan enter the hall alone, and approach the sleeping queen.
He watched as Tristan slit her throat. He watched as the king in his grief, took his own life.
The prince stared down in disbelief and shock at what the king had just done, broken from his trance only when he noticed White Feather, sitting hunched against the wall and nursing his injures.
'You…'
White Feather with a great effort rose to his feet, using the wall for support. Doubled over, each step was an agonizing task as he made his way towards the great window at the back of the hall.
Tristan watched him unmoved as White Feather drew closer to the window, breaking the glass that tinkled to the floor like falling rain.
White Feather stepped forwards, and vanished from sight.

‘Who is *this*?’ Farrell asked Amaia, glancing from one to the other in confusion.
‘This?’ Amaia looked happily to him. ‘His name is White Feather. He is my guardian angel.’

Chapter Seventy-One
The Scary Horse

Amaia was reunited with Arlen and Carl the next day, after spending the night at the healers. Farrell insisted on this, just to be safe. Although White Feather argued that she was fine, he followed Amaia to the healers and stayed with her overnight to keep her company. In the morning, the two of them met Arlen and Carl.
‘I have something to tell you’ Farrell said to them.
‘What happened?’ Carl asked with concern. ‘Why was Amaia at the healers?’
Farrell was about to speak when White Feather, who had until that point been invisible, suddenly appeared right before him.
Carl cried out in shock, stumbling and falling back. White Feather threw his head back in laughter, holding his sides as they began to ache. ‘That was so much fun!’ White Feather cackled, wiping tears from his eyes, bent doubled over. ‘Why haven’t I done that before?’
‘How did you…?’ Carl gasped in astonishment.
Arlen went to help him up, watching White Feather curiously with a frown. Carl stood, dusting himself off.
‘What's going on?’ Arlen asked Amaia slowly. ‘Who is this man?’
‘Oh, I'm not a man’ White Feather sang to him. He moved close to Arlen almost seductively, humming happily to himself and brushing Arlen’s cheek with the back of his hand.
He giggled suddenly, jumping back and vanishing.
The others glanced about them, looking for him, but he was nowhere to be seen.
‘Is he always like this?’ Farrell asked Amaia.
‘I think he’s in an unusually good mood’ she explained.
‘Why?’
‘Because’ White Feather answered reappearing between them, ‘I've found Amaia again’ he said, turning towards her and squeezing her in a tight hug.
‘Who is this?’ Arlen asked Farrell. ‘Where did he come from?’
White Feather vanished again, the others at first thought he had just disappeared, until they realised he had shrunk down in size. They saw him; he was tiny now, sitting on Amaia’s shoulder.
His familiar place.
He stood, holding her earlobe to stop himself falling off, reaching up on tip toes and whispering nonsense into her ear, giggling and disappearing again.
‘His name is White Feather’ Farrell told Carl and Arlen. ‘He’s a fairy.’
‘A fairy?’ Carl echoed.
‘A guardian angel’ Farrell explained. ‘Some Weather Makers are followed by fairies.’

‘Annabel wasn’t’ Arlen replied.
‘Not all of them are followed by fairies’ Farrell went on. ‘They appear to Weather Makers that are in danger…. apparently.’
‘If they are able’ White Feather added having returned to normal size again, coming to stand beside them. ‘If there is one nearby. We are bound to Weather Makers; we *sense* their presence; we feel their pain and joy.’ He sighed happily, moving to Amaia and holding her around the waist, resting his head upon her shoulder. ‘We love them’ he sighed again, becoming still as if he were falling asleep.
‘White Feather was the one who helped me escape the place where Tristan kept me imprisoned’ Amaia explained. ‘He helped me and protected me when I needed him. He stood between the king and myself and protected me from him, protected me from harm……. that’s what happened to his eye, and where the scars that cover him now came from. I owe him my life. If he hadn’t protected me, I might not be here now.’ She held him back, holding him tight. ‘I love him too.’
‘He was the one you were praying for’ Farrell realised. ‘When you went by the name Layla, back at the temple.’
‘Yes’ Amaia said. ‘And I realise now what was wrong with me earlier. Weather Makers and fairies are bound to one another, and without White Feather watching over me when I was reincarnated, I became lost.’
‘And now that you’ve got him back’ Carl said, ‘you are yourself again.’
‘Yes’ Amaia said letting White Feather go. ‘When I died again, to escape Tristan, I woke alone, and without White Feather, I was missing something, but I didn’t know what it was……because I lost my memory. White Feather was the piece I was missing.’
‘It’s good to see you smile again’ Carl told her.
‘It’s good to be able to smile again’ Amaia replied.
She moved away from White Feather then, stepping towards Carl and leaning forward to kiss him, holding both his hands in hers.
‘Hey’ White Feather said moving close to Arlen again. ‘Do you want to see mine?’
‘What?’ he stammered.
‘Oh White Feather’ Amaia frowned, rounding on him with her hands upon her hips. ‘Stop teasing people.’
‘But it’s so much fun!’
‘White Feather’ Amaia said sternly. She spoke to the others. ‘He wants to show you his wings.’
‘Wings?’ Farrell echoed.
White Feather closed his eyes. A white light grew from his back and he smiled, revealing four, long thin glass-like wings. They were beautiful, with black veins running down them, looking almost like spider web patterns, or the patterns on a leaf.
The others stared at them in awe. Arlen reached out to touch one.
‘Extraordinary’ he breathed. ‘They’re absolutely incredible.’

A few days later, Farrell and Arlen both bought Amaia a gift.

They walked down the street towards Amaia who waited, the beautiful black mare they led following after them. Standing either side of Amaia were White Feather and Carl.
Amaia gasped at the sight of it. 'A black horse? I thought they were really rare.'
'Not if you know where to get one' Farrell told her smugly.
'Happy birthday' Arlen beamed, handing the reins over to her.
'My birthday?'
'It's today' Farrell grinned. 'Don't you know?'
Amaia gazed up at the beautiful black creature before her, a striking horse with a muscular build and a coat that shone like silk
'Do you remember when you were very young' Farrell said to Amaia, 'many years ago, I promised to buy you a horse of your own one day?'

'I like to play with the toy animals' Amaia giggled, moving one of the decorative painted horses across the floor and pretending it was galloping.
'Would you ever want a real horse?' Farrell asked her.
'Not one big and scary like Alastor. He's so scary!'
Farrell chuckled to himself in amusement, reaching forwards and patting her hair.
'Maybe I will get you one when you're old enough to sit on one' Farrell said.
'Can I have it now?' Amaia asked hopefully.
'No' Farrell told her sternly. 'You're still too young.'
'I hate it when grownups tell me that!' Amaia cried indignantly. 'I can't wait to grow up!'
'Now don't say things like that. You shouldn't wish your life away.'
'But I want to be taller and smarter' Amaia complained. 'Mama is so clever. I want to be like her.'
'Well, you just have to wait' Farrell said.
'I can't wait to be tall and beautiful like mama' Amaia went on. 'She's so beautiful.'
'She is' Farrell smiled warmly.
'So, when can I have my own horse?'
'I told you' Farrell said. 'When you're old enough to sit on one without falling off.'
'Ok' Amaia said becoming quickly distracted. 'And I don't want a scary one like Alastor. I want a nice one.'
'Then I nice one you shall get.'
'Good' Amaia said shortly. 'Just don't forget about your promise.'

'What a handsome creature' Amaia said in awe, running her hand down the horse's mane. 'Not at all scary as I remember.'
She withdrew her hand, stepping back.'
'I used to be so frightened of Alastor when I was young' Amaia mumbled, almost speaking to herself. 'Now I see he was just a horse.'
'Where did you get it from?' White Feather asked as he hovered beside Amaia.
'We bought it' Farrell shrugged. 'Arlen and I.'
'Aren't they worth a lot?'

‘Yes’ Arlen said. ‘But we just happened to be in the right place at the right time. She was supposed to be a warhorse’ he explained admiring the mare, ‘but she didn’t quite make the grade, so she was sold on. That’s where we came in’ he winked.
‘Thank you’ Amaia said to the both of them. ‘It’s a wonderful gift.’
‘What are you going to name her?’ Carl asked.
Amaia hummed to herself thoughtfully.
‘Lucy’ she said after a time.
‘It’s a wonderful name’ Carl smiled.

White Feather sat on the rooftop above their heads, watching happily as Amaia rode away with Carl, mounted on a horse of his own. They rode side by side out of the town and across the open plains. Below him Farrell and Arlen parted ways.
‘At last,’ White Feather sighed with contentment, ‘after all this time, Amaia finally has the life she deserves.’
He glanced around him then, expression darkening as he recognised a figure that stood on the edge of the tree line in the woods that grew near the town.
White Feather rose to his feet, unfurling his wings and flying over towards him.
White Feather appeared before the figure. Tristan did not seem at all surprised to see him there; it was almost as if he was expecting him to appear.
‘You are not welcome here’ White Feather told him firmly. ‘Amaia does not want you.’
Tristan did not answer; he only stared at White Feather in silence.
‘I will be watching her’ White Feather told him, ‘and *you*. You have no place being here’ he said. ‘Go home.’
Tristan leant against the tree with his arms crossed; he stared back at White Feather with sunken eyes. ‘I have no home’ he answered in a dead voice. ‘My parents, my wife, my son…my new child…are all dead. Amaia is all I have left now.’
‘I don’t care’ White Feather glared at him. ‘Can’t you see she’s finally found happiness? She doesn’t care about you anymore.’
Tristan didn’t reply.
White Feather turned his back on him, facing the town now.
‘I will watch over Amaia’ he said to the world. ‘I will watch over her everyday…. until she draws her last breath.’ He smiled happily, hugging himself. ‘My dear Amaia, I will always be there, but you must live your own life now, with your husband.’ He bowed his head. ‘I will always be there, always, watching from a distance……but there is one last thing I have to do.’
His body began to glow as his delicate wings grew from his back once more. He lifted into the sky, leaving behind him a trail of glowing light that faded as he went, leaving Tristan behind him as a ghost.

He travelled to a place he knew well, but had not visited in a long while. A small village far away.

White Feather landed gently on the soft earth, taking in his surroundings. The scenic village was peaceful, and the sun shone down brightly upon the open world. White Feather began to wander the village, moving slowly and gazing all about him at the people. Working in the fields, sitting outsides their homes, selling items from stalls, milking cows, he reacquainted himself with this once familiar place.

It took only a short time for White Feather to find what he was looking for. He stopped outside the home of a couple called Anya and Roy, the people who had opened their home to he and Amaia after their daughter was taken.

White Feather saw a curious thing then. Sitting on a bench outside their home was a woman he had not seen before. He approached the house, unseen by all around him.

The woman was pretty, with long black hair; she looked to be about the same age as Amaia. Beside her sat a man. As the two talked together, White Feather noticed how they looked at each other, how they smiled at each other. The man placed a hand upon hers, and she leant towards him, giving him a kiss.

White Feather moved closer to her, freezing as she turned her head towards him and looked him right in the eye. He realised with a start that she could see him. Fairies had the ability to hide from others, but could not make themselves invisible to Weather Makers.

White Feather realised suddenly who this was, speaking out loud as a name came to his mind.

'Annabel…'

White Feather stepped back, slipping out of sight away from her and moving around to the back of the house, where he found what he was looking for.

'Hey guys' he said to the horses. 'Long time no see.'

He untied the two horses, mounting one and leading the other by rope. He travelled at a gentle pace, moving for days across the map, and back to the small town where Amaia had grown up in.

He dismounted the horse he rode, leading the both of them through the town as he walked. He searched for someone, but the old man was nowhere to be seen. White Feather stopped a passer-by to ask.

'Excuse me' White Feather said to the young lady. 'Do you know an old man who lives here named Walter?'

'Walter?' the woman repeated. 'He was my grandfather. He's dead now.'

'I'm sorry to hear that' White Feather bowed his head. 'If that is the case, then I believe these are yours' he said, handing the reins of both horses to her.

'Ruby?' the woman said incredulous as she recognised the horses. 'Bell!'

She glanced back towards the stranger, but White Feather was gone.

Epilogue

It was many years later, that Arlen passed away.

Amaia went to his grave, dressed all in black with her hair covered. She laid the white lilies upon the stone slab, rising again. Behind her, her husband Carl held her in comfort.

The year after, Farrell passed away, to join his brothers and his beloved wife in the afterlife.
The year after that, a son was born.

They lived quietly now in a secluded village near the mountains, raising their son they had named Jason, who turned out to be so much more like his mother than his father dared to believe. He was strong and healthy, and grew up happy.
One day, when Jason was walking in the woods alone, he placed a hand upon a nearby tree. Closing his eyes slowly, and taking a deep breath. Frost grew outwards from his palm, engulfing the entire tree, and the ground beneath his feet.
He smiled.

The family lived well, and Amaia was very happy.
But in those days, she would often look about her, and to the skies above.
But she never saw him, not since that day she was given a black mare as a gift from Farrell and Arlen.
Amaia never saw White Feather again.